

### **Confession**

Psalm 32:1-7

I John 1:5-10

NASA launched the space probe Voyager 2 two months after Linda and I graduated from high school. Its initial mission was to buzz by as many planets as possible before it stopped functioning. Its builders thought it might work function for five years. It has lasted nearly 44. It has sent back stunning images from the systems of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. It has traveled nearly twelve billion miles from Earth and now has gotten nearly twice as far from the sun as dwarf planet Pluto. Last week NASA sent Voyager 2 a command. It “promptly” obeyed. (We air-quote “promptly” because at that distance even signals moving at the speed of light take over seventeen hours to reach the probe.) Oh, the command? Reset your clock.

NASA engineers did not care about Voyager 2's clock. They sent the command to test whether the probe would still obey instructions after an eleven month breakdown in communications between it and Mission Control. The fact of the obedience mattered more than the task performed. In our passage from I John, the author builds a case for moral conduct as an expression of our connection to God. Not that obedience makes us holy, but that the holy God has told us how we ought to live. If we fail to walk our talk, the author tells us three times in just six verses, “we lie”. Obedience in and of itself matters as much as what we actually do when we obey. The fact of the obedience matters as much as the task performed.

John starts by reminding his readers that, “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” Scholars nearly unanimously agree the same man wrote both this letter and the Gospel of John. They share a distinctive voice, vocabulary and themes. Seeing God as light/life/perfection/holiness is one of the most important of these themes. The Gospel of John opens with, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...In him was life, and that life was the light of people.” Light in both passages has a rich, poetic range of meaning, but central to it is the idea of God guiding us to truth and holiness. When we “go to the light” we go to God. The Lord God is perfect, without darkness. Indeed, physics teaches us that darkness is the absence of light. God is light. God, by definition, makes sin disappear.

This is Good News. But now we must return to that word obedience. C.H. Dodd, the great Welsh Reformed theologian of the first half of the twentieth century, wrote, “There is no religion in the Christian sense...unless it includes moral endeavor... Christians, believing in a God of pure goodness, accept the obligation to be good like (God).” (C.H. Dodd, Johannine Epistles.) We worship the holy God. We worship Jesus Christ, whom we believe to be sinless. The light of Christ reveals what is holy. The light of Christ leads us to follow the path of holiness. But actually living a life of “moral endeavor”, well, that requires a decision on our part. “Doing” holiness is a high calling, so high it seems impossible when we honestly consider our sins. Nevertheless the Word of God calls us to attempt it.

The Word commands us to obey the call to holiness as individuals. (It also

commands corporate holiness, but that will serve as our topic another day.) Individual moral agency may be an old-fashioned phrase but it still packs a biblical wallop. It means the decision to try to act in a moral way personally. We do not often speak of morals these days, and more's the pity. Unless combined with self-righteousness, morality is a powerful source of good. Morality leads us to respect others' needs. Morality leads us to restrain ourselves for the good of the community. Morality leads us to deal honestly in commerce, athletics, everywhere. Morality empowers us to walk in the light. Why then does morality have such a bad reputation?

Morality is so often accompanied by a holier-than-thou attitude it has become almost impossible to advocate for it. Think of the movie *Footloose*. The story tells of a high school boy who moves from Chicago to a conservative small town dominated by a preacher who thunders from his pulpit against dancing. (He thunders against a lot of things, but dancing is most important to the plot.) Of course the boy and the preacher's daughter become infatuated. Of course she, too has reasons to rebel. Of course, her father the preacher has his own issues. But the bottom line is that we have allowed Hollywood treatments of hypocrites claiming to live moral lives to discourage us from trying to do the same. Somewhere along the line movies and music and the rest of pop culture "converted" from a jingoistic advocacy for "the American Way" to an unabashed opposition against any sort of effort to live according to the Word of God. We need to do better than both.

I composed an arrangement of the theme song from *Footloose*, of the same

title, and tried to sell it to the director of the Indiana University pep band. He had been a mentor to me. I had sold him other arrangements, including Georgia on My Mind, by Hoagy Carmichael, and Crazy Little Thing Called Love by Freddy Mercury and Queen, and a five-second rendition of the opening chords of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for use whenever the refs made a bad call ("Ba ba ba BAAH!"). Every time we played them in front of the 17,700+ people at Assembly Hall, including my parents sitting to our immediate left, and Linda's parents sitting to our distant right, I felt a surge of, well, sinful pride. But the director would not pay me for Footloose. He would not let us play any version of it. ***And I honestly think it was the best arrangement I ever produced.*** A devout Christian, the director told me he could never glorify such a "godless message". We argued. Not because I wanted the \$100 for the arrangement. (Well, I wanted the \$100.) No, he sincerely believed it would dishonor God to play a song from a movie that in his view glorified immorality. I couldn't see it.

I asked him whether he had ever seen the movie. "I don't have to," he said. "I know how it goes. 'Those People' think my faith is pathetic and my trying to live like Jesus is hypocritical. I will not use their music." I was frustrated. He was frustrated. It opened my eyes. I respected this man. I still do. Linda knew him too, and agrees with me that he and his wife were among the most sincere, dedicated, public Christians we have ever known. But we have come to the point where the word morality conjures up a negative reaction. And this signals a significant surrender. So long as we genuinely attempt to obey God, to walk in the Light, we must never apologize for it. If that IU faculty member cost me \$100 he gave me a bigger reward:

he modeled for me a stubborn integrity based on his faith. If I disagreed with him on the message of a movie (and I did and I do), I nevertheless learned from him a lesson on the power of principle.

And so to the last turn in the road of this sermon. One critical piece of obedience God requires of us is confession. Confession of sin is the first step of the only path we have to salvation. King David apparently wrote Psalm 32 after he recovered from a serious illness. He lived more than 3,000 years ago in Palestine. Then and there people believed that sin caused illness. Thus, if he fell seriously ill he must have sinned seriously. "While I kept silence," that is, while he continued stubbornly to refuse to confess his sins, "my body wasted away through my groaning all day long." But then, "I acknowledged my sin to you...and you forgave the guilt of my sin." The resulting euphoria inspired him to write this Psalm.

What burden do you carry? What sin have you committed that you need to confess? What keeps you from doing so? Pride? Fear? We have reached Lent. We have entered the time in the church calendar set aside for self-examination and repentance. Four days ago we observed Ash Wednesday in the time of COVID. So we and folks at Unity Presbyterian Church waited inside their sanctuary for those who would come to do a "drive by" liturgy. People arrived when they could, read a prayer, contemplated their own conduct, and when ready came forward to receive the imposition of ashes on their foreheads.

Unity Presbyterian's pastor Andrew Black and I had planned what we would say as we placed those ashes on people foreheads: "From ashes you came and to ashes you shall return." This is a theologically sound, traditional thing to say on Lent's opening day. But I found myself saying instead, "When you confess your sin God is faithful and just, and will forgive." Maybe the more optimistic tone appealed to me. Maybe God inspired me to say it. I cannot tell now. But what I do know is this: salvation results from a sequence of actions. Oddly enough, sin starts it. The passion of Christ follows. Next must come confession, then forgiveness, then at the last, justification. We will examine each in turn these next few Sabbaths. In the meanwhile, know this: we must confess in order to receive forgiveness. And once we experience the joy of knowing we have been forgiven, we must dance in the light.

Confess your sins that you might initiate the process that leads to salvation. Walk in the light as a response to the grace of the One who is the Light. We cannot forgive others unless and until they confess their transgressions. We cannot be forgiven unless and until we confess our own. Confess. Walk in the light.