

# OKAY, I CONFESS

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Mother's Day, Sunday, May 11, 2014**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **What's Wrong with a Prayer of Confession?**

Being that this is Mother's Day, we have some guests with us, so first I want to welcome all who are visiting from near and far for this holiday. Second I need to tell you as visitors that today's sermon is a bit unusual. It might be a touch rough, at least the first half of it.

In Protestant worship, going all the way back to the 1600's, services almost invariably began with a prayer of confession followed by an assurance of pardon. You'll note that the very first thing I did after arriving here six and one-half years ago was to change the order of worship to get rid of that prayer of confession. I had trouble with it even then and probably never told you why. Today I will.

Prayers of confession are generally generic. They're not the kind of prayer that people might recite in the privacy of their homes. They're purposefully generic so that everybody in the sanctuary can pray them with integrity. Thus, some of the verbiage is devoted to asking forgiveness for sins of omission and commission. "God, I'm sorry for the things I should have done but didn't, and I'm sorry for the things I did do and shouldn't have." I've written probably a couple hundred such prayers.

## **Explaining the Background Of Our Statement of Oneness**

I'd like to explain something about our "Statement of Oneness" that we now print near the beginning of our worship service. To do so, I need to give you a bit of history, admittedly grossly oversimplified. Anybody who knows church history will immediately sense it.

The Hebrew worldview and the Greek worldview had a number of significant differences. One of the most important ones, a philosophical, core kind of dissimilarity, was that the Hebrews thought of the human being as a singular entity, made in the image and likeness of God, a child of God. The Greeks, however, were more interested in looking at subdivisions of what amounted to a human. There were physical, mental, and spiritual attributes. Add them all up and you get a human. But what is important is that the Greeks looked at the distinguishing characteristics within the human being.

For the Hebrew worldview, it was simpler. A human was one thing, whereas for the Greeks and then the Christianized Hellenization of the Greeks, you had the body, mind, and spirit. You had the physical and the spiritual. You had the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. You had the flesh and the spirit.

### **The Flesh Metamorphoses; The Spirit Transmutes**

Over time, as the centuries wore on, the flesh, the physical being, metamorphosed into badness, and the spiritual being transmuted into goodness. The physicality of our lives became associated with sin. As for spirituality, that should be our aspiration. And so we come across sentences such as “We are *in* the world but not *of* the world.” Well of course you’re in the world. You’re incarnate. You have a body. You can’t help it. But for goodness’ sake, don’t be of the world. That’s bad, leading to sin and temptation.

### **Four of the Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony, Pride, Envy, Lust**

As the church developed in the early centuries, the notion of physicality came to be defined as bad, and defined very specifically. Let me give you several illustrations: The church fathers came up with the seven deadly sins, and by deadly they meant that these seven are bad enough to commit their perpetrators straight to hell.

An example is gluttony. The deal with gluttony is not that you have a spare tire, not that you’re overweight, not that you’re tending toward heart disease or diabetes. No, the issue with gluttony is that you are paying too much attention to the physical, to the flesh rather than to the spiritual. So here’s the spiritual, here’s the flesh, and there’s the mind in the middle. If the mind hits that tipping point to the degree at which it’s more interested in the physicality, in the flesh, in that extra helping, that’s where it becomes the sin of gluttony.

Two of the other deadly sins are pride and envy. So you are very interested in your status in the world: the job you have; the position you have in society; the house you live in; the chariot you drive, led by fine horses. You’re interested in that kind of stuff, those things, and now you have fallen into pride because of the excessive meaning such things have to you. Conversely, if you don’t have all those things and really want them, you’re envious. You want them, and your mind has tipped to the point at which they have become excessively important to you.

### **The Big One – All of It**

Pride, envy, gluttony, three examples, but here’s the big one – lust. Few things are as incarnate as lust. So you look upon another person with sexual interest, no matter whether it’s appropriate or inappropriate. But down through the centuries, all of it has become inappropriate. *All of it,*

because the ideals of celibacy and virginity were held to be more Godlike. Yet who doesn't have those kinds of thoughts, so lust exemplified the sinfulness of everybody.

Another facet of lust ended up through history having strong sinful consequences resulting from lustful dreams. The significance is that it's not controllable by the conscious mind. It happens in the middle of the night, when you find yourself dreaming about your sexual attraction to another person. Of course it's inappropriate; it's not celibate; it's not virginity. And it happens to everybody.

### **Philosophers and Theologians Conclude that Humanity Is Primally Sinful**

Through the ages, from about 300 to 1000, philosophers and theologians have concluded that, because everybody has such thoughts, has such dreams, therefore sin is more deeply ingrained, more pervasive, more of who we really are, than we had ever supposed. Fascinatingly, they decided that the human being is primally, archetypally, at root a sinner.

That realization led to the idea that the worship service *must* begin with confession. What are the odds that God is going to listen to our prayers if we are lustful, gluttonous, envious, prideful, and full of all the other sins but don't at least confess first. Omission. Commission. Get them all covered.

Here's the prayer that I was taught, written by John Calvin in the late 1500's. I have prayed this prayer perhaps a couple hundred times from my formative years as a Christian between the ages of 18 and 30.

“Lord God, eternal and almighty father, we acknowledge before your holy majesty that we are poor sinners, conceived and born in guilt and in corruption, prone to do evil, unable of our own power to do good. Because of our sin, we endlessly violate your holy commandments. But O Lord, with heartfelt sorrow we repent and turn away from all our offenses. We condemn ourselves and our evil ways with true sorrow, asking that your grace will relieve our distress. Have compassion on us, Lord, and in removing our guilt also grant us the daily increase of the grace of your holy spirit and produce in us the fruits of holiness and of righteousness pleasing in your sight. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

### **Finding a TULIP in the Garden of Reformation**

This prayer – with its notions of our being poor sinners, conceived and born in guilt and corruption, prone to do evil, unable of our own power to do good, endlessly violating your holy commandments – is rooted in a theological understanding that came to fruition at the time of the Reformation. One of the five doctrines, Calvinistic in nature, that led to prayers like this still being used across the land was called “Total Depravity.” The acronym for the doctrines is

TULIP, which signifies the different understandings that I was steeped in, raised in during my youth.

*T stands for Total Depravity.* This doesn't mean that people are as bad as they can be. It means that sin is in every part of one's being, including the mind and will, so that man cannot save himself.

*U stands for Unconditional Election.* God chooses to save people unconditionally; that is, they are not chosen on the basis of their own merit.

*L stands for Limited Atonement.* The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was for the purpose of saving the elect.

*I stands for Irresistible Grace.* When God has chosen to save someone, he will.

*P stands for Perseverance of the Saints.* Those people God chooses cannot lose their salvation; they will continue to believe. If they fall away, it will be only for a time.

That's not quite as bad as it sounds. It doesn't mean that everybody is totally depraved, but it does mean that every facet of a human being is in some way touched by sin. It happens when you have a meal, write an e-mail, make a phone call, make love to your spouse, read a book, dream at night. The doctrine was that *every facet of your life* – your physical life, your mental life, your emotional life, your spiritual life – is in some way tainted, polluted, stained, infected by sin.

So now, what do you do if you are a Christian pastor, raised in the Calvinistic tradition, Presbyterianism, and you wake up one morning not believing a word of it? What do you do? There was a time when I believed all this stuff. The first thing I did was to start worrying about my pension. But it forced me to rethink my beliefs. I don't particularly believe in the T or the L anymore.

### **Conceived and Born in Guilt? Baloney!**

That prayer is offensive to me these days. Poor sinners, conceived and born in guilt and corruption. Seriously? Conceived and born in guilt? On Friday morning a new great-grandchild was born into my family. When I look at a kid, pretty much up to the junior-high level or so, I still think of innocence and purity. And a little baby? About as beautiful and innocent and pure as it gets in this world. Prone to evil? Humanity does evil, but I don't think everyone is prone to it. Unable of our own power to do good? Baloney!

Look at the good this church has done with its limited resources. It's amazing! Endlessly violating the holy commandments? I have violated some of the commandments, but I have gone weeks on end without violating any one of them. And I'm not special. You have done as well or better, and I'm no better than you are. So again, I have been forced to rethink some things.

Today is Mother's Day. We all know it's a Hallmark holiday, but all the same there is some powerful goodness in it because this day reminds us of maternal things, the maternal virtues. There's an emphasis upon parental love, guidance, nurture, wisdom, support, even straightening out when a child needs to be straightened out. And just simply unconditional, self-sacrificing love. Our parents, after all, are the people who gave us life. In the Christian scriptures, the primal metaphor for the divine is "parent." God the father, God the mother.

Now, if parents, human parents, were to act the way we suppose God acts, particularly in the Old Testament, they would be in jail. Yet again, something needs to be rethought when we read through the scriptures that God loves these kids but not those kids. As a matter of fact, such scripture can be so extreme that one group of kids is actually allowed to kill another group of kids. And oh my goodness, we love boys more than girls. What about capital punishment for virtually any kind of transgression, including disobedience? If that really were carried out by human beings, our species would end in the teenage years!

### **I Confess It; I Believe it to Be True**

Could it be we've got some things wrong about God, about human beings, and about our relationship?

All this leads me back to the Statement of Oneness at the beginning of the worship service. I believe the statements therein at an unbelievably deep level. "That we were made in the image of God," every single one of us – the Down Syndrome child, the child raised in such horrible circumstances that it inevitably ends up in jail. Every child in the image and likeness of God. The primal thing about that verse in Genesis is that it occurs before there are any divisions among humanity. Before there was male and female, before there was Jew and Greek, before there was any distinction between humanity and its cultures. All of them were made in the image and likeness of God. "We are children of God," and we are "beautiful in God's eyes."

The fourth paragraph in the statement says, "The Scriptures declare that the entire kingdom of God is within us." Yes, there's guilt, but this is amazing as part of what Jesus taught. It comes from Luke 17: 21, where he says with emphasis that "the Kingdom of God is within you." He uses a very rare word, "within" with emphasis, like shaking you, getting your attention. *Emphasis*, "the Kingdom of God is within you." And then it says in part 2 of Luke/Acts that we live our lives immersed in divinity, for "In God we live and move and have our being."

I'm going to spend the rest of my life pondering the integration of those two verses. I can't think of anything better to do. The kingdom of heaven is within me and within you, and we swim and live and move and have our being, everything that we do, immersed in divinity.

I confess. I believe it to be true. Yes, there are hurtful and unjust things, motivated by hatred and fear, but the cure for them all is love. So I want to come full circle. That's my confession.

That's what I believe to be true about humanity. I'm not going to begin worship with a prayer of confession any more for the rest of my days.

Yes, we do some bad things, but I want to emphasize these core truths that uplift humanity. Think of a mother lifting up a small child who has skinned a knee, brushing it off, applying a little antiseptic, making sure it's got a Band-Aid. You're okay now. You're bandaged up. Now go and play.

That's what God does with us. You are beloved children of God. Go and act like it.

*Amen.*