

SIN MANAGEMENT

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 17, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am reminded that the title of this sermon has been subjected to an unexpected nuance. According to the signboard out front, the title is shown as “Sin Management with Joyful Noise”!

A Nice Thing to Tell a Little Kid

One of the first verses that I was taught as a kid to memorize — this will sound a bit strange to you — comes from the First Epistle of John, Chapter 1, Verse 9: “If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Nice thing to tell a little kid, right?

So I memorized that. Now here is the context for Verse 9: The verses before and after are: “⁸If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and the word is not in us.” Why my parents wanted me to learn that particular verse right away, we can only speculate about it.

Now, having had that drilled into my head from my earliest years, don’t you find it ironic that ours is one of the few churches you could enter in the entire county that does not have a Prayer of Confession at the very beginning of the worship service. I receive more criticism, bordering on condemnation, from my colleagues for this one liturgical matter than almost anything else. It has to do with the way in which we were taught.

The Prayer of Confession: Enjoy It

I was also taught that, if I were going to pray, it would be a really good idea for me to confess my sins. Otherwise, God wouldn’t listen. Okay, I thought, I’d better do that. And then, by extension, corporately it would be very important that we collectively confess our sins first. Otherwise the worship service wouldn’t be pleasing to God. I believed that for a long, long time.

Let me share something with you. Here is the Prayer of Confession that I was raised with. I have prayed this confession hundreds of times. It was written by John Calvin, a French theologian and reformer who lived in the 16th Century, principally in Switzerland. A leader in the Protestant Reformation, he defined Presbyterianism.

Bear with me for a moment while I read that prayer.

“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, most gracious God, Father of mercies, for the sake of your son Jesus Christ our Lord.

“And in removing our guilt, also grant us 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.”

Time for That One to Go

I was raised Presbyterian. This is the prayer that I mouthed in many of the churches that I attended for a lot of years. In a sense, I'd like you to note that in this exercise of religiosity there isn't any sense of *real* healing or *real* forgiveness. You sort of get *provisional* healing or *provisional* forgiveness, but don't ever forget, you poor sinner, that, without doubt of the church elders, you were conceived and born in guilt and corruption.

Seriously, do we still believe that these days? Shouldn't that be thrown into the dustbin of history? Shouldn't we reject the notion that little babies are born into sin and corruption? That amounts to the transfer of original sin by sex. Time for that tenet to go. “Prone to do evil, unable of our own power to do good” was the phrase that got me thinking about this kind of nonsense. Am I really unable to do any good under my own steam?

We even have this imploring language in our daily speech. Suppose there had been a car accident in the road ahead of me, and I pull over; the car's on fire; the driver can't get out; I help open the door; drag the guy out. After all the commotion, what popped out of his mouth was expectable. He said what's built into our language: “Thank God, you came.” Wait a minute, I thought, how about thanking *me*? So we have this tendency: Whatever is good, we give God the credit; whatever is bad is usually our fault.

So every Sunday, year after year, reciting this ancient Prayer of Confession was the emotional equivalent of self-flagellation. Every Sunday, you need to begin worship that way. Emotionally flagellate yourself, and intellectually remind yourself that you are a no-good sinner. Therefore, God might be happier with your confession in the worship service.

One Day Something Snapped

I couldn't take it anymore. What happened was that I looked up the word “confess.” I've always been interested in root meanings, the etymologies of words. In Latin, “con” means “with.” “Fess” means to say or speak or talk. “Fess” is actually the same root as “fant,” as in “infant.” So an infant is just somebody who can't talk yet. Thus, to “confess” means to “say with.”

That original word is neither negative nor positive. It's sort of neutral. It's just like you're agreeing with somebody. He or she says “X” and you also say “X” instead of “Y.” That's “confessing.” You're saying something *with* somebody else.

So it occurred to me that maybe we could say something positive in that sense of the word “confess.” This led 20 years ago to my very first draft of what is now our Statement of

Oneness. It was my confession to say something positive and to say it *with* God about humanity.

Okay. This has been a little heavy so far, but now I'm going to get heavier for a few minutes. Fair warning.

The Church as a Grocery Store

I'm going to criticize the Church for a short time on this subject: The notion of sin management. I'd like to talk about the Church — not this particular congregation but the Church with a capital C. Let me use a business analogy. Imagine a retail business, and for an example, I'll choose a grocery store.

For a grocery store to work, you have to have several factors that work together. One is that you must have a place to do business. You need bricks and mortar, a place where people can go. You require customers, so the community that's in the neighborhood of the grocery store offers you customers. Good products are essential, of course, so you work with farmers and dairy suppliers and distributors and produce people so that you have groceries in the store.

And now you need a need. You must somehow or other link up the products with the customers. Well, that's sort of a built-in thing for a grocery store. People get hungry. So it's like you have a built-in need, and that's why grocery stores work so easily: People get hungry, and they want groceries. But there's one other requirement, and that is that you have to have repeat customers in order to stay alive as a business. That also is built-in for a grocery store. Your customers keep coming back because they keep getting hungry every day.

Now set the grocery store analogy aside. Look at the church as a business model for a

moment because there's something there that we shouldn't do that we are doing anyway. We have a place; we have our bricks and mortar. We have our customers, typically the people who are in the community. The church normally has a pretty grand vision of its potential customers in that the vast majority of denominations, and groups of churches pretty much want to evangelize the whole world. Their goal really isn't just to get along; it's more to evangelize the Jews, the Mormons, everybody.

Take Your Repeat Business to Church

Then you also have a product; you have forgiveness; you have a gospel message. But now, the need. How do you hook up the people with your product? And here's where the church does some things that aren't healthy. So it does two things: The first thing is that the church says, Well, if you don't buy my product, there's a rather extreme risk that you're facing because you've got hell, a fiery pit, and damnation. The second thing is that if you don't buy the product, if you're not into the gospel message, then you risk the loss of business. Not only that, but you've got sort of a reluctant God up there.

So you go to church; you get the gospel message; you buy the product; and then you're covered, right? Well, for a week maybe. But the church needs the repeat business. And so this forgiveness that you got by the Prayer of Confession on a Sunday morning can be lost. It might not even last until Sunday night because it can be lost with either an errant deed or an errant thought. So you have to keep coming back. Don't forget, you're a poor sinner, conceived and born in guilt, unable to do any good. Therefore, you need this product on a regular basis.

And so it leads the church into the business not really of forgiveness, not really of healing but of sin management. And, in my opinion at least, not as a business person but as a pastor, it certainly looks to me like one of the most extraordinary business plans the world has ever seen!

You have the whole world as your customer base. You're the only person who sells the product. Nobody else is offering your products, really. As a matter of fact, not even any other church. It's only my church, and your members have to buy it or else. It only lasts so long, and then they keep coming back.

What a Great Business Model!

This is not just a Catholic thing. It's also Protestants and Orthodox churches. But it's sin management because you have to hold onto your customers as sinners or they won't keep coming back.

Can we do something positive instead? At the end of Galatians (6: 16), Paul writes: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Circumcision was the sacrament of people in that day. It was pretty important. It was the physical act that marked them as people of God.

And here's Paul, member of the Sanhedrin, one of the big shots, and he's saying, I'm sorry, but it really doesn't matter that much. What really matters is a new creation. In his Second Letter to the church of Corinth, the text that I read just a couple weeks ago, he wrote: "Therefore if any one is in Christ, he [or she] is a new creation."

I Refuse to Do Sin Management

Speaking personally, I refuse to do sin management. It is a waste of my time, and it is

certainly insulting to you and a waste of your time as well. I will not do it.

But I am more than happy to work to awaken Christ-consciousness in people. To help people to remember their primal birthright as children of God and all the wonderful things that come with that memory and that realization. To help people remember how good they are inside.

That primal birthright, by the way, is filled with the spirit, the breath, and even the kingdom of God within our very souls. A lot of people forget that. Even if, by Sunday night, they've forgotten it.

Awakening to that full realization is one of the supreme joys of being human.

Changing Churches Before Death

Well, I'm almost done. I do want to tell you one other thing, though, and it involves a story that I told you several years ago. It affected me very deeply, and there are a couple of you here who might have known this person about whom I'll be talking.

Her name was Lillian. When I knew her, she was in her mid-eighties. This was when I was pastor of First Presbyterian Church, so it was a number of years ago. She was the quintessential little old lady, sweet and loving, and her friends were all part of the church. She had been a member of First Presbyterian, if memory serves, somewhere in the neighborhood of 47-48 years.

We were about ready to celebrate her 50th anniversary of being a member of that church when she made an appointment with me. When she sat down, I was very curious as to what she wanted to talk about because she was one who never drew much attention to herself.

Then she proceeded to tell me that she'd decided to leave First Presbyterian. Thunderstruck and without any clue as to what was wrong, I wondered to myself why she would want to leave the church at all.

So I asked her, "Why?" I'm not just surprised. I'm shocked. Quietly she told me that she was raised with the message that salvation was to be found in one particular type of church, and at age 85 it wasn't worth the risk to miss gaining entrance into heaven. And so she left a Presbyterian church and went over to a different one. It broke my heart. I don't think she liked it that much either, but she thought she had to do it. She died shortly thereafter.

Some eight or nine months later, before she had died, I happened to be at a breakfast with her new priest. I asked him about Lillian, how was she doing? He actually didn't seem to know who she was, but nevertheless he said she was doing fine. I took a moment to tell him her story because I doubt if he knew it, and his response was "Oh, that's too bad," and he never did anything about it.

Keep People Sinners – Great for Business

But it's horrible for people. It leads to suicides, anorexia, bulimia, shame, guilt, families torn apart with a teenage pregnancy or with a young person entering adolescence and coming out, broken families, countless judgements against one another.

Remember, let's say this *with* God. We're made in the image of God, and that will shine clearly. We're children of God, and therefore we have a birthright, something that we don't have to try to earn. It's ours from the get-go of unconditional love for all of our days.

Humanity collectively and you individually are beautiful in God's eyes. We forget that by Sunday night. And there's this flow, this interplay which reminds us that the kingdom of God is within us, and we are within the kingdom of God. Divinity and light and spirit flow within our souls and out into the world and around us.

It's the Big Mystery of love, and it's gorgeous. Love of God. Love of humanity. Love of this world. It will conquer all.

That is my confession.

Amen.