

WGUMC July 16, 2017 "the forgiveness of sins"  
Luke 7:36-50

Back in 2015, Donald Trump attended the Family Leadership Summit in Ames, Iowa, where he was asked about his Christian faith. Specifically, he was asked if he ever sought forgiveness for his actions. He answered, "I am not sure I have. I just go on and try to do a better job from there...I think if I do something wrong, I think, I just try and make it right. I don't bring God into that picture. I don't." [CNN, updated July 18, 2015]

We have Donald Trump to thank for bringing out into the open what a lot of us try to keep hidden: the fact that when we do something wrong, we don't like to bring God into that picture. We can handle it, we say. We can make it right. That is, until reality rears its ugly head and says, "Wrong!"

And herein lies our problem. It's hard to say truthfully that we believe in the forgiveness of sins when we have such a hard time dealing with the very concept of sin.

For one thing, we don't really understand what sin is. We think of sin as a list of bad things, and if we do them, then we are bad people. But in Hebrew, the word for sin simply means "missing the mark." The Bible says that we were made in the image of God and none of us live up to that image. We universally miss the mark. But that doesn't make us bad; it simply makes us human. It means that God made us moral beings and God respects us enough to hold us accountable for our actions. It also means that we carry around a consciousness that we are not as good as we could be. We are not yet the people God created us to be. In other words, we are sinners, but today I hope to convince you that that isn't such a bad thing to be.

You'll have to stay with me, and that can be hard, because we tend to wince every time we hear the "s" word. We humans have suffered through far too many fire and brimstone sermons, too many witch hunts and excommunications. It

didn't help that along the way church leaders concocted elaborate rituals for public shaming. In colonial days, we put sinners in the stocks so that everyone could see and sneer at them. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, we stitched the crimes into sinners' clothing, and they had to wear that badge of shame at all times, as in *The Scarlet Letter*.

But shaming wasn't just for big sins. The Dutch had some ingenious ways to shame people for even small sins. Bad musicians were forced to hang a "shame flute" around their neck and people who were late for church were given a giant rosary made out of "shame stones" to wear.

Thank goodness that the practice of public shaming declined in the modern era. The stocks were outlawed in the United States because they were considered "cruel and unusual punishment." The whole business of taking responsibility for personal sins is no longer a public transaction. Today, aside

from actual crimes, most sins are pretty much a private problem.

But in some ways, that makes sin an even bigger problem. For one thing, when sin is private, we tend to deny it. We aren't very good at calling ourselves to account. Instead of facing it, we bury it. But then the burden gets heavier and heavier because when we keep it locked inside, there is no way to share it.

Catholics have the confessional; most Protestants don't. People don't come to me to confess a sin and to be relieved of that burden with words of assurance and a promise of forgiveness. Except on Ash Wednesday, the closest we get around here to coming to confession is coming to an AA meeting.

Alcoholics Anonymous is basically a nonsectarian version of communal confession. It gives people the chance to declare their truth publicly but also privately, anonymously. It enables

them to share their burden with peers in a community of mutual support and accountability. For those who are familiar with the twelve steps, you know that this is thinly-veiled Christianity. The person who is truly anonymous in AA is Jesus.

Jesus is lurking in every step of the program, which starts with a person admitting they are powerless over alcohol, believing there is a greater power that can restore them to sanity, and making a decision to turn their will and their life over to God. It moves on to making a searching moral inventory; admitting to God, to themselves and another person the exact nature of their wrongs; getting ready and asking God to remove them and being willing and taking the time to make amends to people they have harmed. It then calls for praying for a more conscious contact with God; and on the strength of that spiritual awakening, carrying the message with them and teaching these principles to other alcoholics just like them.

Though they use different words, AA groups are preaching the same ideas that the church teaches: confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It's the old, old story of salvation. And no one can deny that these steps have in fact worked for millions of people around the world. If you ever wanted scientific evidence of the effectiveness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the transforming power of forgiveness, here it is.

It has often occurred to me that churches would be better off if we functioned more like AA groups. We would be more effective at preaching forgiveness if we looked at sin the way we look at alcoholism. When we began to understand that alcoholism is more of a disease than a moral failing, we found more effective treatments. What John Wesley well knew but his followers forgot is that the Bible looks at sin in the same way, as a spiritual disease in need of healing. Why can't we?

After all, what does Jesus say to the woman in the city, a known sinner, who comes to Simon's house while they are having dinner? He doesn't tell her that she is a screw-up. He doesn't publicly shame her, the way Simon does, calling her out for her sin. He doesn't need to. The woman is telling the truth about herself through her tears. No words are necessary. She comes to Simon's house with her alabaster jar of ointment because she wants to reach out to Jesus, because she hopes, she believes that he has the power to cure her dis-ease. Without going into the gory details, Jesus says to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then he says, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

In Greek, the verb *sozein* means both "to save" and "to heal." So Jesus is also saying, "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace." While Simon was only prepared to shame her. Jesus had the power to heal her. Yet Jesus wouldn't have

healed her if she had not been willing to acknowledge to herself and to him that her soul was sick.

I don't have a TV, but those who do are bombarded with advertisements for all kind of drugs to treat physical and mental illnesses. That's because we've gotten pretty good at talking with one another about what is ailing our bodies. The older we get, the worse it gets. I'm afraid I'm becoming the person I used to complain about, the one who when asked, "How are you doing?" will give you a twenty-minute summary of all bodily functions.

If we can divulge such intimate details about our physical health, why can't we talk about our spiritual health? Why can't church be like a Sinners Anonymous group, where we can say to one another: "You know, I'm really struggling with feelings of jealousy today." Or, "I have this problem with pride that has been getting in the way." Or, "I let my anger get the better of



me and lashed out at work and I know that I need to apologize but I don't know what to say."

What I love about people who are in recovery is their spiritual honesty. We could use a lot more of it in the Church. At its best, the Church is a hospital for sinners as much as it is a training camp for saints and you quickly learn that the sinners and the saints are the same people.

I want to be clear. We don't confess our sins because we want to feel bad about ourselves. We can do that easily enough without confessing to anything. We confess our sins because when we finally stop denying the truth and living the lie, we're going to feel much better about ourselves. The Gospel is good news because God's forgiveness sets us free to be ourselves. It is very possible to be a happy sinner, because only sinners get a Savior.

I suspect that a lot of us suffer from spiritual PTSD because of how sin has been talked about in the Church's

history. And that tempts us to push God out of the picture and out of our lives right when we need God most. We could, like Donald Trump, just go on and try to do a better job from here, but then we might as well say, "Jesus, you're fired!" because if we don't confess our sins, we have no use for a savior. If we put Jesus on the unemployment line, we'll never know the joy of his forgiveness.

So let's bring God into the picture and embrace our sin, not because it will make us sad, but because we know that it is the starting point of the road to salvation. As Luther once said, "Sin boldly, but trust in Christ more boldly still." In that confidence, let us say together the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,

is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.