

Ash Wednesday  
February 17, 2010  
Luther's Small Catechism: Confession

We are focusing our services this Lent on the basics of Christian faith. From the very early days of the Christian church Lent has been for instruction. Each service will focus on one of the 6 parts of Luther's Small Catechism. Luther wrote this little catechism in 1520 as a way to teach ordinary people the basics of Christian faith in a brief, easy to remember form. As part of the confirmation curriculum, it has been an essential part of the spiritual formation of Lutherans ever since. We begin tonight with the section on confession and forgiveness, a central focus of our Ash Wednesday worship.

The Roman Catholic church that Luther grew up in taught that God only forgave sins that had been confessed to a priest. If you died with a serious sin unconfessed, you might go directly to hell. Luther was always waking up terrified in the middle of the night, remembering some sin that he had not confessed. Because he never could be sure that he had confessed everything, he always felt that God was angry with him and he never had any sense of forgiveness and peace. For a long time Luther thought that was just the way God was: angry. But when Luther finally began to understand the grace of God in Jesus, he realized that confession was not the demand of an angry God, but God's gracious hand of love extended toward us to lift our burdens and comfort us in our fears.

"The key", thought Luther, "is to make confession optional." But he soon found out to his surprise and horror that for a lot of people "optional" meant "forget about it".

What is it that is so crucial about confession and forgiveness? It is first of all, the chance to confront your sins, your doubts, your distance from God directly in the presence of another Christian. It is not simply reciting a little list of slip ups, though often those failing tell us something about the larger picture. It is your whole orientation to life, the whole matter of trusting Jesus for everything. You need to bring your specific failures to confession, yes, but you also need to bring your bitterness, your resentments, your sense that life has cheated you, that others don't appreciate you. You need to bring your fears – your fear of being a failure, your fear of getting sick or being incapacitated, your fear of not having made a difference, your fear of dying. You need to bring every place where any other power overshadows the power of Jesus Christ in your life. Sometimes you can't put words to it. You can only bring your emptiness, your ache, your sense of distance from God.

Far more important than what we say is what God has to say. What God wants to say to all who repent and want things to be different is, “I forgive you. My love in Christ is stronger than all of the things that you regret, stronger than all of the things you hate about yourself, stronger than all of the things you fear. I want to release you from every other power that holds you, from your anger, your resentment, your bitterness, your disappointment, your worry, your fear of other people, your fear of abandonment, your fear of suffering, your fear of death.” It is not just the jagged corners of our lives for which we need God’s forgiveness and healing, but the black holes and the dark abysses that run through the center of our lives. It’s not just a little bit of our lives, but all of our lives.

Because of Luther’s deep appreciation for private confession as yet another opportunity to hear the gospel, it is still a part of our Lutheran tradition. It can be a great help when you are weighed down and troubled, when you have a hard time hearing God’s words of forgiveness as words really spoken to you.

An order for individual confession and forgiveness, much like the one outlined here in the small catechism, is included in both the green and the cranberry hymnals and you can feel free to ask that of any Lutheran pastor and know that the confidentiality of what you say will be taken very seriously.

The most frequent way that we confess our sins and receive forgiveness, of course, is in the order for public confession that we use to begin almost every service. Its purpose, of course, is the same. Here is the place to bring your fears and failings, your doubts and your anger, all of your need for God to the One who loves you, to the only One who can heal you and set you free.

That is what the period of silence is for before we say the confession of sins together. It’s the time to ask yourself where you need the forgiveness and healing of Christ to touch your life this week. You probably need to think about that a little ahead of time, and that’s why a little preparation the night or the morning before can really deepen your worship. ( )

The silence is there before we confess so that we have a chance to see where it hurts, to see where the need is, so that we don’t rush through the whole business without paying attention, so that we don’t fail to receive the love and the care that our Lord wants to give us.

Receiving God’s love and care for us in Jesus Christ is, after all, what Lent is all about. If we fast, if we pray, if we receive Holy Communion, if we have ashes marked on our foreheads and hear “Remember that you are dust and to dust you

shall return”, if we attend Wednesday services, it is all to this end: that we learn again how great is our need for God and how richly God has supplied that need.  
Amen

*Quotes are from Luther’s Large Catechism, in the Book of Concord, pp.457-461*