

## A Curious Confession

Mark 7:24-31

“Why is it we say, “confession is good for the soul?” If God already knows all we do, for example, why should we need to confess? In Donald Miller’s book *Blue Like Jazz* the author relates a different kind of confession story.

They were students, a Christian *small group* on a college campus wrestling with how to make their presence felt. Curiously, they decided to set up a confessional booth right in the middle of campus. The first customer came in. His name was Jake and he started the conversation.

“What’s up, man? What is this? You want me to confess my sins, right?”

“No, that’s not what we’re doing, really. There is this group of us who were thinking about the way Christians have sort of wronged people over time, like the Crusades, etc.

Jake responded, “Well I doubt you personally were involved in any of that, man.”

“The thing is we are followers of Jesus. He asked us to represent him well, but it can be hard. So there’s this group of us on campus who want to confess to you.”

“You want to confess to me? You’re serious! Okay then, what are you confessing?”

There’s a lot. I’ll keep it short. Jesus said to feed the poor and heal the sick. I’ve never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out. I know a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me who know him carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than relaying the message Christ wanted to get across. There’s more you know.

“It’s all right, man.” Jake’s eyes were beginning to water.

“Well, (clearing my throat) I’m sorry for all of that.”

“I forgive you.” said Jake, and he meant it. Then he said, “This is cool what you guys are doing. I’m going to tell my friends about this.

“I don’t know whether to thank you for that or not. I have to sit here and confess all my crap!”

Jake looked at me very seriously and said, “It’s worth it.”

The scripture lesson today is the story of a Syrophenician woman and her curious confession. If you ever needed a stark confirmation of the utter humanity of Jesus, look no farther than this brief encounter, the exchange of Jesus with this Gentile woman. She came boldly, even audaciously, to Jesus and begged him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Literally, she asked him to cure the girl’s *confusion of mind*. And Jesus replied in a most un-Jesus-like way: ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’

(Mark 7:27)

Yes, Jesus called the woman a “dog,” literally a “puppy,” more of a household pet than a wild animal. If this story was a genuine encounter, it seems to show Jesus reflecting racial and cultural attitudes of most Jews toward Gentiles. Some scholars suggest that Jesus may also

have experienced some honest doubt about how far his ministry really extended. He had been sent to the Jews, but maybe not to the Gentiles?

Regardless of his reasons, it was a pretty demeaning reference for Jesus to use. But the woman did not react to the racial slur. She used it back at Jesus. She confessed to him with utmost respect. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She didn't get indignant at the slur, but articulated the deeper issue that all God's children are entitled to the spiritual food Jesus brought. She was not justifying the demeaning comments nor accepting a submissive role for women, but she was speaking boldly of the need to put first things first. She confessed that the *first thing* was for her daughter to receive the healing Jesus offered. And she challenged Jesus' bottom line. He responded, "for saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

Being in a beautiful setting out in nature, the world can feel like a wonderful place: harmonious and gentle. At the same time, we know the world we live in is also broken in many ways. It is a violent place marked by hatred and oppression. Prejudice and fear bring about suffering and division between people. We experience a loss of hope that we can ever achieve the promise, in any ongoing way, of a beautiful day in a beautiful setting. Using religious language, the word sin describes the brokenness that stalks our world and that haunts our own souls as well.

Way back, in the Old Testament, we are told how to deal with the reality of sin in our lives and relationships. The book of Leviticus says:

When you realize you have sinned and committed a trespass against the Lord by deceiving a neighbor.... when you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud..., you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth [20%] to it.... And you shall bring to the priest a guilt offering. The priest shall make atonement on your behalf before the Lord, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do. (Leviticus 6:1-7)

This is the prescription for healing brokenness and achieving wholeness in our lives, our relationships, and our societies. The brokenness we experience is a symptom of sin that is far more than we imagine, just as with the young man running the confessional booth in *Blue Like Jazz*. We long to move from alienation, guilt, and brokenness to rest, grounding, and healing – to wholeness and reconciliation in our families, our significant relationships, our communities, our society, the world, and in our hearts. But how can we do it? How can we find such healing?

Injustice, dishonesty, economic and racial inequities, social stratification, war, distrust, and much of the anger and malaise you may often feel are signs of a deep brokenness, a division in the oneness with God for which all life was created. This *sin* requires restitution to the neighbor, friend, or loved one over and above -- 20% more -- and confession to God in acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of our actions.

The key is this: when you realize your part in the brokenness, don't wait. Act right away! Acknowledge to yourself your part in the raised anxiety, hurt feelings or lack of trust. Make restitution over and above. That's required to make it right. The same is true of us as a society. No grudging apologies or reluctant recompense are acceptable. And, finally, spiritual wholeness requires us to make our peace with God who always forgives. But to accept and receive that forgiveness, we must find the attitude that will make us receptive to forgiving and being forgiven – the softness of heart that is like a soft, fertile field. The Bible tells us there is a way! Whatever the sin and brokenness, forgiveness is offered, wholeness is available, and new life is promised.

We live in a world in which relatively few have so much of the world's wealth and use so much of the world's resources. Like Jake said in the confessional booth, we're not personally responsible for most of the injustice and suffering. We have not caused genocide, sectarian violence, or racial segregation, but we are part of this world and cannot separate ourselves from its travails. We participate in its beauty and joy. We confess that we also participate in its sin. And our best efforts to fix the problems only seem to make them worse. We are inundated by symptoms of brokenness, of misplaced faith, and inverted values even as we are just trying to make a living and make a life.

We are called to a different set of values, actually those very same values that once Jesus of Nazareth championed and for which he gave his life. Jesus calls us to live our lives by those values. And let us be challenged and inspired in that direction by those great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians Oscar Hammerstein and Maria von Trapp: "strength doesn't lie in numbers, strength doesn't lie in wealth." True strength lies in aligning ourselves with the Spirit who encourages and challenges us again today to live our lives on the narrow and winding road. Let us find strength and value in relationships moving toward wholeness and in compassion for the needs of others and respect for the journeys of others, the interdependence of all people, and the partnership each of us has with God.

I confess to you that sometimes I have grave doubts we will ever achieve a world in which all persons live together in harmony, seeking the best for each other as well as ourselves. I also confess that hope for such a world is the dream of my life, though I have done far too little in my life to move toward this dream. Yet I know my confession empowers me to start again, and continue moving toward hope.

I believe that as we confess to each other, we do have hope for healing and potential for progress and peace that we will move toward that dream -- God's dream -- and that it involves each of us and all of us together. I challenge you today to confess to yourself and acknowledge places of brokenness in your life. Commit yourself to move toward restitution and toward reconciliation and oneness with God. Begin now so that your experience of life will be grounded more than disconnected, whole more than broken -- powerful, clear, and strong in the strength that gives us a field of dreams to inspire our own dreams in Jesus' name.