

Proper 6-C
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St. Stephen's, Spokane

I was poking around on the internet the other day and found a site called "Confessions 4U" -- a place where you can anonymously confess anything you would like to confess -- and make it available to anyone who wants to read it.

Then I noticed that there were lots of these: sites called **not proud.com**; **grouphug.com**; and **confessions.net**. It works like this: You visit the website, choose a category (like lying, or infidelity, or stealing) and then type in what you need to say to get this off your chest. On some sites people can then read your confession. Other sites seem simply to disperse them into cyberspace, perhaps with a cyber-absolution.

One person commented on her posting, "It actually feels good to know that someone will read it." (Even if that someone is a total stranger staring at a computer screen.)

I found all of this absolutely fascinating. I wondered why there are so many of these sites and who the clients are. Are these people who don't pray or know of God's forgiveness, or perhaps don't believe in God? Or people who have no one they can trust with a secret that burdens them? Or people who are frightened of ridicule, rejection or shame if someone found out that they are not perfect? It probably goes without saying that these are people who do not feel safe being honest about themselves with real people in real time and so they can turn to the relative anonymity of the internet.

I suspect this high-tech way of unburdening ourselves is a symptom of two things. One is how much we really long to be forgiven. The other is how much we worry about getting everything right.

And I also suspect that they are a byproduct of how hard we can be on each other. How unforgiving. It's tough to let someone know about our failures, even though we all have them. It awfully difficult to risk ridicule or rejection.

Add to that our cultural delight in scandal. In exposing the failings of another – particularly someone who is a public figure. There is a whole industry of tabloid journalism that thrives on that.

Forgiveness can be a pretty tricky thing for us. But it is pretty simple and straightforward for God. And that brings us to today's readings, where confession and forgiveness are central.

In the gospel reading, Jesus is having dinner at the home of a Pharisee – a pillar of the religious establishment, when something very odd happens.

A woman – apparently a woman with a bad reputation – more or less crashed the party, sought Jesus out and began to weep, washing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair and then anointing his feet with ointment that she had brought. It was a lavish expression of gratitude and affection. Not your average dinner party activity.

You can almost hear the collective “hrrrump!” as Jesus' host and the other guests watch this scene. The religious and social customs of the time would dictate that Jesus would have no contact with this woman – and certainly should not be touched by

her. The fact that she was a questionable woman intensified the disapproval. “If this man (Jesus) were a prophet, he would have know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner,” his host snarls.

Jesus deftly exposes the self-righteousness of his host, not by confronting him directly, but by launching into little a story about a creditor and two debtors who could not afford to pay him back. One debtor’s debt was far larger than the other. The creditor forgave both the debts and Jesus asks which debtor loved him more. The answer is obvious – the one whose debt was larger and more burdensome had a greater amount of gratitude. The logic is that those who are forgiven most have a deeper level of gratitude. At the dinner party, the woman is showing her love and gratitude for God after having received the gift of forgiveness – after having had this burden removed.

“Your sins are forgiven,” Jesus tells her. “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” Simple as that.

This is a moment of great tenderness and respect. A moment of liberation. Jesus, in effect, has given her the gift of her future – a new start. She has encountered good news, despite the obvious disapproval of the others in the room.

Prof. Bill Countryman recently retired professor of New Testament at Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, says in the very first line of his book “The Good News of Jesus,” “What God says to you in Jesus is this: You are forgiven. Nothing more. Nothing less. This is the message Jesus spoke and lived.”

What happens when we appropriate this good news? What happens when we receive it? What happens when that gift of forgiveness resides in us? Complicated questions, for sure.

Countryman says that once the good news sinks in, we won't have to tell ourselves lies about ourselves – how lovable or unlovable we are. The ultimate lover has forgiven whatever needs forgiving and hopes to inspire in us the same gifts of love – a new affection and reverence and esteem for God's beloved, our own selves. (A love, I might add, that also extends beyond ourselves to our neighbor – to the whole created order. I think that's what Paul meant in that Galatians reading when he said that it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.)

The amazing part of all of this is how hard it is for us to grasp it. To accept it. To live it. To know at a deep level that this gift of forgiveness is given to us with an incredible generosity. There's more than enough to go around.

A love that may make our community life a safe place to be ourselves. To reveal our imperfections among others who are also imperfect. A place where we don't have to go to the internet with our sins and faults to have a sense of forgiveness, but instead, know the confidence that we are loved into life and can live in gratitude and hope.

A prayer from Jennifer Phillips:

Because you have forgiven me, I can begin again.
I can choose a different way.
I can rest in your peace despite the turbulence and sting of the past.
Help me see beyond the limits of what has been into the open space of your possibilities,
And give you thanks.
Amen