

August 9, 2015
Isaiah 6:1-7
1 John 1:5-10

Weird Things Presbyterians Do #5: Confess our Sin

When you think about it, it is a little weird that every Sunday, we get together and confess our sins. We start out our worship service by greeting one another warmly. We gather hoping to be in the presence of God. We listen to Shelley's beautiful music. We open our hearts and minds to the great and awesome love of our Creator. That's why we are here: to be in the presence of God. So we are called to worship and we sing a hymn of praise all to the glory of our faithful and wonderful God. But then, all of a sudden, we go into this Prayer of Confession. And from our bulletins, we read together the words about how we have failed. How we have not followed God's rules and how we have not loved as Jesus commanded us to love. We start talking about ourselves. And we confess that we are broken and mistaken and in need of forgiveness.

Every Sunday we come into the presence of God and we confess our sins. Maybe you have wondered why we do it or what confession really means or how to do it right. I remember when I was a kid, confession

was not my favorite part of worship. It made me really anxious. Every Sunday I would read the prayer of confession ahead of time, and I would worry about all the sins that were in the prayer. And were all those sins really mine? What if I hadn't done all those things? And how could God forgive me every week? I worried about confession. I felt bad about confession. I felt sad because God couldn't like me very much.

Especially with all these sins. Confession made me feel anxious and ashamed. It was no fun. How many of us feel that way now?

Today we begin a series of the Top Five Weird Things that Presbyterians do in worship and we start with number 5: Confession. To many people, confession is very weird. It is strange and uncomfortable. It seems like a form of self-loathing to admit your faults. And admit to the things you have messed up and even to the things you don't even know you have messed up. And to do it out loud and in front of others. And not just once a year. Or once a month. But every week.

Confession is weird. It's weird to admit that you have done things wrong. It's weird to do it publicly rather than in private. It's weird to do it during worship. In fact, many churches don't. They leave it out of

their Sunday service altogether. It's too much of a downer. It's too personal. It causes too many feelings of guilt. It's too weird. But we Presbyterians do it because we know it is not about shame or guilt. It is not about naming all the faults that we have. Confession isn't just about us. It's about God too. And how God's profound love inspires us to live with truthfully and honestly. In the presence of God who sees us as we are, who is light and love, we can relax. We can confess—to God and to ourselves and to one another-- that God is God and we are not.

In our first scripture reading today, that's exactly what happens to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has this extraordinary experience of being in God's presence. It is overwhelming. He is surrounded by the mind-blowing awesomeness of the Creator. Just the hem of God's robe fills the temple they are in. And there are these other-worldly angels with all kinds of feathers and eyes that are flying around, saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." It cannot be overshadowed or even contained. Can you imagine? Can you imagine what that was like for Isaiah? How do you think he felt? *** terrified, awestruck, unworthy. It's like the school principal calling you

in her office; it's the IRS coming to audit your accounts; it's Southern Living showing up at your house unannounced to do a photo shoot. Worried, afraid, humbled, unworthy. Isaiah feels all of that. In the presence of God, one thing is clear right away. That God is God and Isaiah is NOT. God is good and holy and perfect. God is righteous and wise and just. God is creator of the universe, and author of all life. And Isaiah—Isaiah is not any of those things. “Woe is me!,” says Isaiah. “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” In God's presence, Isaiah's first reaction is to confess that God is God and he is not. And that is our reaction too. When we come in God's presence in worship. When we encounter the Lord of hosts, in all of the Lord's awesome glory, the truth is so very, very clear—that we are so very small, and that our thoughts tend to be small, and our actions, they are pretty small too. Woe is me. We see the truth and we confess that God is God and we are not.

God is God. That's the first thing we are reminded of in the presence of the Holy One. God is God. God is bigger. God is greater. God has been

around a long time before us and God will be around a long time after us. And this God loves us. We might have been told that this God is tired of us. This God hates it when we mess up and hates having to forgive us over and over again. But not the God Jesus showed us. Jesus showed us that God so loves us and this world that he came to be with us. Jesus shows us a Creator who seeks the lost and heals the broken and gives his life for us, while we are STILL sinners. This God knows we are broken and difficult and wrong in so many way. But Jesus shows us God isn't ready to give up on us. God will never give up on us. Because God loves us and wants to be with us and wants us to be whole. So we can live truthfully and without fear.

God is God. But how often do we forget that? How often do we forget that this God is our God and not some other god? How often do we feel like we have to serve something else? That something or someone else has power over us? How often do we give our time and energy and devotion to something that is not God? Our Reformed tradition tells us that we humans are always struggling with that. That we must be careful because we will worship other things. What are things we worship in our

society? Power? Status? You bet. Money? Big time. Sports, politics, technology. Comfort and security. The approval of our friends. Bigger, better, shinier things; anything and everything can become an idol that we worship with our time and energy. Honestly, truthfully, we need the reminder every week of who is in charge here. We need the reminder that God, the God we know in Jesus Christ, is God.

God is God—and we are not. We are not—that’s the second part of confession. We are NOT God. We do not have it all figured out. We do not have control of things. And our thoughts tend to be so small.

Sometimes there is a moment when you realize that. When you in all of your secure know-it-all-ness come into the presence of God. This past weekend, I went to the national Big Tent conference put on by our denomination. There were Presbyterians there from all over the country and all over the world. I met a young man from Sudan, who had lost all his family in the war there. And people from Egypt trying to act for peace in a volatile country. And people from Ghana trying to minister to their white community in the Bronx. And people living on the border with Mexico, ministering to refugees. And people helping young women

in California escape the sex trade. And it shook up my little world. And I thought about how sheltered I am. And how safe I am. And how I don't think about any of those things but that violence and fear and darkness are all around us, not just in other countries. And we are called to hold the light of Christ wherever we are. How has God shown you recently that you don't have things figured out and you are not in control and that your small thoughts are not as big as God's?

God is God and we are not. Notice, we use the word WE a lot. And we use that word WE on purpose. Because this isn't just me confessing my sin. It's us confessing together. Together we help one another see the truth about God and about ourselves. Now, I confess that sometimes when I pray the prayer, I think about others. I think about how this confession of sin is really for someone else. In fact, I can think of just the person who should be confessing these sins. Do you ever do that? Do you ever pray the prayer of confession and think about someone else who needs to confess these sins? Someone else whose thoughts and actions are small. Someone else who is greedy and selfish. And misguided and mean. Someone else who does not love God or their

neighbor, not like I do. All those others who lie and cheat and steal and curse and covet and lust and break the Ten Commandments. Do you ever find yourself thinking about those people when you pray the prayer of Confession? It's easy to do. It's easy to get distracted and think of someone else's sin instead of our own. It's the easier than being honest and doing the hard work of truth that we need to do in ourselves.

Our prayer of confession does not use the word 'you' or 'I' or 'they' or 'them'. It uses the word 'we'. Because as much as this confession is about me, it's also about us. It's about us, each of us, admitting that God is God and each one of us is not. And if I can be honest with God about my failures and expect forgiveness, then so can you. And so can he. And so can she. So can all of us. Because all of us are here in the presence of God. And all of us are carrying burdens and sorrows. And all of us are broken and messed up and in need of a Savior, whose love for us is greater than our sins. And greater than our smallness. And greater than death itself. I need grace. You need grace. We need grace.

It is a risky thing to do. To admit that God is God and we are not. It is risky and dangerous to invite the light into what we would keep in the

dark. And some would say it's weird. But because of the love of God, we have the courage to do it. That's what it says in our scripture reading from 1 John. We can be brave and confess over and over that God is God and we are not. And come again and again into the presence of God's righteousness and God's forgiveness. Again and again, admitting our need and our neighbor's need. So we can be honest and real. So our fellowship together can be honest and real. So life itself can be honest and real.

We are being invited to live in the presence of God together. To live knowing that God is God and we are not. Just close your eyes for a moment. And let us pray: God, you are God. And those other things in our lives that are not god, let them not be God. Those things that have taken over our lives. That make our decisions for us. That person who has dominated our thoughts, and preoccupied our minds. God, you are God and that other thing, that other person is not. God, you are God, and we are not. We are not in control. We are not able to do everything right. We are not able to go this alone. We are too small. We need you. Our neighbors need you. This church needs you. We confess. With the

assurance of Jesus who gave his life for us that you ARE our God. And we don't do this alone. In Jesus Christ, you are with us, always healing us and redeeming us and giving us new life. Let your honest and real life be restored in us and in this world.