

Lenten Midweek 2018  
Zion Lutheran Church, Vassar, Kansas, et al.  
Rev. Joshua Woelmer

Text: Neh. 9:1–3, 6–8, 26–31

“I Said, I Will Confess My Transgressions unto the Lord”

Theme: Even as we are surrounded by many physical blessings of God, we recognize our spiritual poverty and our need to confess our sins.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Recently the Wall Street Journal published an article on gratitude.<sup>1</sup> It cited a recent study that demonstrated a lower level of gratitude in those between 18 and 24 years old. It saw this lack of gratitude as a result of entitlement, how our culture sees the whole world as revolving around oneself. Yet the article goes on by suggesting ways to fix this problem and to help your millennials become more thankful. It cites other articles that demonstrate that gratitude leads to less anxiety, less depression, and a greater well-being, and that “religious gratitude—toward God—was associated with additional reductions in anxiety and depression and increases in well-being.” Indeed, “counting your blessings,” the article suggests, “may provide a built-in coping strategy” for daily hassles and annoyances.

Now, did you catch that? The irony is that in order to fix narcissism and entitlement, you’ve got to seek out the positive vibes of thankfulness. In other words, don’t be thankful because *someone else* gave you something, but be thankful because it will make *you* feel good. Indeed, emotion or other synonyms are brought up at least 15 times in the article.

Now I bring this up because we have done something similar to confession. Confession has lately become more associated with the psychologist than the priest. Indeed, there’s another article from Psychology Today titled, “Why Confessing Is Good for You,” with the tagline, “New research shows why taking full responsibility feels better.”<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, we should not be surprised at all. It is part of our sinful nature. Memories of previous sins stab into our mind. Guilt burdens us, and our conscience is often pricked by those things we should not have done. How do people respond? Well, we should not be surprised when people use confession to make themselves feel better, to cover over their guilt with the psychology of good emotion. And yet, it is much like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, hiding in the darkness and covering their guilt with flimsy fig leaves instead of going before God and revealing to him what they have done.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-raise-more-grateful-children-1519398748>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/ulterior-motives/201501/why-confessing-is-good-you>

This problem of responding to one's sins or problems with good feelings isn't limited to a psychologist's couch, nor even to those who try to distract their troubled mind with distractions or entertainment. This happens each and every day of our lives.

You see, our human nature will only confess our sins when we think that it will get us out of a worse situation or when it will lighten the burden of guilt that is on our hearts. We see this in the many scandals that rock our society. When news comes out about something bad that someone did, I find that I am not as surprised by the sinful act as I am by response to the news.

How do those caught in sin respond? Some offer an immediate "I'm sorry," but then expect the news to eventually cycle off of them.

Others resist confessing what they've done or try to explain it away, insisting that they had nothing to do with what happened. Eventually even more news gets out, and they often see the need to go into hiding.

Finally, still others attempt to deflect what they've done by donating money to a charitable cause.

And yet, like with gratitude that I mentioned before, this confession is more about how to save oneself or cover one's bad feelings than it is about how one has offended or hurt other people.

This is why our reading from Nehemiah this evening should strike us as odd. Nehemiah tells of the return of Judah from its Babylonian captivity. This was a joyous time for God's people. Their forefathers had engaged in idolatry and syncretism, and God allowed them to be conquered and taken into exile. But God was faithful to his promises, and he granted them freedom.

So what did they do when they got back to Jerusalem? Did they rejoice and call a feast of thanksgiving? No. During the Day of Atonement when the High Priest would go into the temple to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people, they assembled with fasting in sackcloth and dust. They "confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers" (3).

They had not sinned against any other nation or people. They did not do this to feel good; no doubt they were already feeling pretty good, having retaken Jerusalem and the land of their fathers.

No, the people of Israel confessed because they realized that they had offended someone even greater than themselves. They had offended the God who had created the world, chosen Abraham, and brought them out of the land of Egypt. Our text for today omits the salvation history of Israel. It summarizes all of God's works for his people. Everything that he had done for them. They repeat all of this back to God.

And yet they were rebellious. They disobeyed and acted presumptuously. They offended God himself by their actions. “Nevertheless,” our text concludes, “in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God” (31).

This is the reason for their confession: they know that they have offended God, and they are deeply sorry for it. God has done so much for them, especially here and now, as he has brought them out of their exile in Babylon and given them back their own homeland. They are filled with sorrow and remorse. They are sorry for what they as a people have done. So they confess their sins.

This too is our response. We have heard the Ten Commandments and what God desires in this life. We have heard that it shines a bright mirror on our actions and declares us guilty of each and every commandment.

Guilt is not merely an emotion, something that we think we can cover over with positive emotions. No, guilt is deeper. It’s a recognition of our standing before the holy God, that we have offended him and angered him.

And so, we are in the place of the Old Testament people. We too are the beneficiaries of God’s rich bounty. He has given us a free land and made us wealthy and even more given us salvation through his Son. Yet we still have much to confess. We need to repent of those things that have drawn us away from God. We always need to confess our sins.

We have the opportunity every Divine Service to do just that, as we confess that we are poor, miserable sinners who deserve nothing but temporal and eternal punishment. We have the opportunity with the whole congregation to confess together that we need God’s grace, just like the whole congregation of Israel.

We also have the opportunity to confess our sins directly to the pastor privately. Luther explains this by saying, “Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts” (SC V).

Private Confession and Absolution have always been part of the Lutheran church, and for good reason. Sometimes we need to get something off our hearts and hear God’s forgiveness for that particular sin. We all have those twinges in our heart or sharp memories of past misdeeds, some of which only God knows. These too need to be confessed and forgiven.

Now, we don’t do this merely because it makes us feel better. The pastor’s study is not a psychologist’s couch. We don’t make our emotions the center of the stage. Rather, we confess our sins to a pastor because we need to hear God’s particular forgiveness for a sin that seems too large or too hard to control. We confess because we have disappointed God and need to hear his forgiveness.

And, yes, it is likely that we will have a weight lifted off our conscience and leave with joyous feelings after we have confessed our sins before God. That is precisely because we go

home with something far greater than anything a fig leaf can cover; we go home with the ultimate covering and forgiveness of sins before God because of all that Christ has done. God's wrath is burned up in Jesus. He hears our confession and forgives us. God is a gracious and merciful God.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.