

# COMING CLEAN

Series: The “Re” Words

I John 1:8 – 2:2; Luke 18: 9-14

October 8, 2017

Rev. David S. Cooney

After working in the yard on a hot, summer day, I look forward to a long, cool shower. I don't dare walk around the house because dirt falls off of my shirt and pants and shoes. I don't dare sit down anywhere because I am grass stained and dirty. I don't dare to stand by others because my clothes are drenched and stuck to me and I stink. I don't even like standing with myself. After a long, cool shower, though, I feel clean and refreshed. Put on some clean clothes and I am ready to move about the cabin again.

A shower refreshes after a day of working in the dirt. A cold drink refreshes when we are dry and thirsty. A nap refreshes our bodies. Time off from work refreshes our minds. A funny movie or nice walk on a beautiful day refreshes us when we feel burdened. What refreshes us when our spirits are out of sorts, or when our relationships with God are discombobulated?

The answer might surprise you. The act of refreshment is confession.

I say this might surprise you because the idea of confession seems anything but refreshing. Confession means admitting we were wrong. It means owning our mistakes. It means being accountable for our failures. Does that sound refreshing to you?

Probably not. For that reason confession is something we try to avoid; if we do confess, we do so halfheartedly and for good reason. Confession makes us vulnerable. After all, confession exposes us to judgment. We have all watched enough police dramas to know our Miranda rights. We have the right to remain silent because anything we say can and will be used against us. The first thing an attorney says to a client is, “Do not say anything. Do not admit to anything.”

We think that is a good strategy in life because whatever we say may be used against us. Confession is risky. If we take responsibility for our actions, if we own our mistakes and missteps, we are hoping that others will forgive us, will still accept us and will still respect us. But what if they don't? What if we say, “I was wrong. I'm sorry,” and the answer is, “Apology not accepted?” What if others start to think less of us or no longer want to relate to us? These are not unrealistic fears. Confession can have consequences. I learned early in life that if I told my parents about how I had violated the rules, things would go easier for me than if I tried to cover things up. It did not mean, however, that there was no penalty. There was still a punishment. So, the temptation to keep quiet and hope I did not get caught was huge.

That temptation stays with us through life, often causing us to keep silent or, if we do confess, to deflect. What do I mean by that? We should be suspicious of deflection when we hear, “I did this, but...” or, “I'm sorry, but...” But what? Usually that means, but it is not really my fault. Whose fault is it? There are lots of suspects. The computer, the manufacturer, the doctor, the government, a stranger, the foreign markets, the school system, our parents, or the latest and best yet, genetics. This predisposition to deflect is seen right in the beginning of the Bible. In Genesis, when God discovers that Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, he

queries them about it. Don't blame me, Adam said, the woman gave it to me. Don't look at me, Eve said, the snake tricked me into it. We ate it, but....

Of course, I have been talking just about confessing to each other, being honest about what we have done to each other. Take all of this and multiply it when talking about confessing to God. Confessing to each other can have stiff consequences, disrupting a marriage or a business partnership, or leading to a job loss. Consequences can be big. Just having someone mad at us for a while is bad enough. But all of that pales when thinking about the possibility of God the judge condemning us for all eternity.

God controls our eternal lives so the stakes are high. Yes, we have heard the promises about forgiveness and grace and abundant mercy. We have no reason to doubt them. But what if we are wrong? What if our particular sin is unforgivable? What if our particular offense is particularly offensive to God? What if God is in a bad mood that day? Can God be in a bad mood? I don't know but who wants to risk it? Confession is a chancy proposition.

That leads us to think that it may be better not to take the chance. So, we employ a variety of schemes. One is simply to pretend that we are not sinning. This is not new to us, by the way. We know it was happening in the earliest church because John felt compelled to write, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Clearly some were saying that they would gladly confess, if they had something to confess, but they did not. To which John said, liar, liar, pants on fire.

More common is to confess, but only to the little things, hoping that God will not notice the bigger things. The variation to that strategy is to confess, but also to make it clear to God that others are doing far worse. Yes, we sin, but on a sliding scale, we really are not all that bad. When we do this, we are hoping God grades on the curve. We might confess but point out that we only recently learned that it was a problem or we follow the lead of Adam and Eve – he, she, it made me do it.

All of these strategies are understandable and have been practiced for centuries, really from the beginning of time. But here is the problem. No quality relationship can be based on lies and deception. Here is what happens. Our cover-ups do not hide our sin from God; they hide God from us. We do not see the benevolent face of God because we cannot look God in the face. We are not free to accept God's forgiveness because we pretend that God doesn't know there is anything to forgive. We are not able to become what God has created us to be because we have not told God who we are. We are not able to fully love and be loved by God because in our deceitfulness, we have convinced ourselves that we are unlovable. In perfect irony, by not telling God, the truth that we think will keep God from loving us, we are keeping God from loving us.

What to do? It is simple. Just put it out there and trust in God's grace. "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me." Look at our gospel lesson. Jesus contrasts two people praying at the temple. One is a Pharisee. His prayer begins with, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." He continues by listing other sinners, including the tax collector standing next to him. He also reminds God of all the good things he is doing. The other man is a tax collector, a person people unanimously would consider a sinner. He would not approach the altar or even look up. All he could say was, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus delivers the

punch line. "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other." The tax collector's honest, unedited confession opened the channel for God's grace to pour in.

This is what John tells us in his first letter. John wrote, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I like the phrase *cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. Just as a shower cleanses us of the dirt and sweat after a long day of yard work, so confession cleanses us of the muck that keeps us from being presentable to God as that clogs the channels of God's grace.

Confession is not just coming clean. It is also getting clean. Computers have a refresh button on them. From what I read, and I do not pretend to understand this, what you see displayed on a monitor requires the computer to draw thousands of images. These are called draw calls. As the screen changes, some need to be redrawn. Those needing to be redrawn are called dirty objects. To keep the processor from having to redraw everything in every page, the refresh button redraws just what is dirty, making the picture bright and clear and full again.

I'm only reporting. Don't ask me any questions. I don't get it fully, but I love the language applied. This says to me that confession is our refresh button. It allows that which is dirty to be redrawn to complete the full picture. As such, confession is not something we should avoid. It is something we should embrace. Indeed, for the Christian wishing a right relationship with God, confession is not optional. It is necessary. It is how we are refreshed.

We are doing a lot with Martin Luther this month because it is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his posting the 95 theses that contributed so much to the reformation. Luther, in his catechism for the church, wrote, "The Christian way essentially consists in acknowledging ourselves to be sinners and in praying for grace."

That says it so simply. Luther's point is that we do not have to make ourselves acceptable to God. We do not have to polish up our credentials or present a stellar record of performance. We do not have to work the scales so that they weigh more heavily on the positive than the negative. We just have to follow the example of the tax collector in the gospel and say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Instead of tying ourselves in knots, trying to make ourselves look better than we are, hoping God does not see right through us, we can simply drop all pretense putting ourselves at the mercy of God.

And we can do that without trepidation because God is merciful. God does not want any walls between us. God wants us to take down the walls so that he can reach us to embrace us. It should be obvious that the Lord does not want to condemn us. After all, he sent his Son to, at great cost to himself, take away our sin.

This is the heart of the gospel message and it is refreshing. We come clean, when we come clean. Confession is not something we do because we have to own up and take our punishment. It is something we do so our souls can be refreshed. When we are rid of all that makes us feel guilty, of all that makes us feel unlovable, of all that makes us feel unacceptable, how free and light we feel. You have heard the expression that confession is good for the soul. This is why. If you have ever confessed to another and thought I am glad I got that off my chest, I can breathe again, you know what I am talking about. When we confess to God, we get that off our souls and we can breathe again, we can live again.

With the use of “re” words, we have been talking about ways of Christian living. When we started, I said that sometimes our lives are devastated and we have to rebuild. It takes time and work and we never rebuild exactly what was, but God makes it possible and we can rebuild something beautiful. Amanda talked about how sometimes we need spiritual CPR and ways we can be revived. I talked with you about the importance of rejoicing in the Lord in all things because in all things God is with us and our salvation is secure. Nick, Amanda, and I taught about the creeds and how they give us the frame on which to hang our spiritual hats, so it is important to reaffirm the tenants of our faith. Last week our word was remember, and as we shared the Lord’s Supper on World Communion Sunday, we remembered our brothers and sisters worldwide and God’s love for all. Today our word is refresh and at the heart of being refreshed is confession.

Make confession part of your daily prayers, not as a dramatic mea culpa, but as an act of humility – just as I am Lord. When we include confession in our liturgy, take it seriously. Don’t hold back. Everyone else is rightfully confessing also. Confess, and be refreshed – all cleaned up and ready to go.

Amen.