

First Week of Lent  
**Practicing Repentance**

Ruth Haley Barton

*“While the truth that we cannot escape God’s all-seeing eye may weigh us down at times, it is finally the only remedy for our uneasiness. Only under God’s steady gaze of love are we able to find the healing and restoration we so desperately need.”*

Marjorie Thompson

I remember an experience with a church elder who dealt with a staff member in a way that was mean and even slanderous. When confronted with such blatantly bad behavior, the best the elder could do was to acknowledge that her communication was “less than artful.” Such a weak admission showed little capacity for self-awareness and true repentance. It highlighted how difficult it is for all of us—and perhaps most especially for leaders—to practice repentance.

Repentance is hard and many of us don’t know how to do it in a way that bears real fruit in our own souls and in our relationships with others. We live in a culture that promotes a profound sense of denial about the presence of sin in our lives and the ways in which our sins and negative patterns wound others.

In our litigious milieu, even when something is our fault, we are encouraged not to admit it unless we can derive some benefit from doing so. We are, in fact, encouraged to twist facts or misuse language in such a way that the spotlight of blame can be focused somewhere else. We use all sorts of different means—ranging from flat-out denial to subtle mis-use of language—to avoid having to admit when we are wrong. Where do we go to learn how to do what Jesus is asking us to do in this week’s Gospel reading?

## **Beyond Denial**

The Christian practice of the examen of conscience helps us to name our sins in God's presence so that we can turn away from that which is destructive in our lives. It involves reviewing some portion of our lives—such as a day or a week, or maybe even the patterns of a life-time—asking God to bring to mind attitudes, actions and negative patterns that prevented us from fully entering into God's will in our lives. We are willing to listen without defending and to see without rationalizing. We do not depend upon our own morbid introspections or keen insights; rather we surrender ourselves to the Spirit of God who reveals truth to us as we are able to bear it.

As God brings different areas to mind, we reflect on what it was that contributed to the situation and how we might respond differently in the future. The examen is characterized by a willingness to allow God to guide the process, which elevates it from a self-help project to a spiritual practice.

The process begins with simply *seeing* something that went wrong in a behavior or an action. It might be a vague sense of something that wasn't quite right (for instance, a subtle resistance to doing something loving for another person) or it could be something that was more clear-cut (such as an angry outburst). We start to have some level of awareness of what happened and we might begin to get a glimpse of how our action or lack of action has fallen short of Christ-likeness and/or how it has wounded others. The next move is the willingness to go beyond naming what happened and to name what was going on *inside me*, seeking some understanding of the inner dynamics that caused the behavior. In this element of the process, we really do need God to guide us because oftentimes the inner wounds, character deficiencies, and sin patterns are unknown to us and we need God to reveal them to us.

## **The Process of Purgation**

Awakening to our own sin initiates a stage in the spiritual life classically understood as purgation in which God gradually strips us of more and more layers of our own sinfulness. Robert Mulholland helpfully points out these different layers. First of all there is the renunciation of all blatant inconsistencies with wholeness in Christ—obvious sins like those that Paul lists in passages like Galatians 5, which even our culture eschews. Then purgation moves to other deliberate sins that may be “normal” and “acceptable” in our culture but are clearly not acceptable in God’s economy—such as certain kinds of lying or shading of the truth that we can somehow justify, but are subtle deceptions nonetheless. There also may be behaviors that are not inherently bad, but would be unloving or unhelpful in our own context—like the eating of meat in Paul’s day.

Next, purgation causes us to become aware of unconscious sins and omissions—those things we might not have noticed earlier on, but now we see them as being a hindrance to our growth. We might begin to see places where we are driven in subtle ways by our own ego or where we subtly manipulate others to get our own way or where we do not always tell the truth. It is painful to see and to name such twisted dynamics within us. Perhaps we are even embarrassed that we did not see them before and yet it is a necessary part of true repentance.

The final stage in the purgation process deals with deep-seated attitudes and inner orientations of our being out of which our behavior patterns flow. Here God is dealing primarily with our “trust structures,” especially those deep inner postures of our being that do not rely on God but on self for our well-being.<sup>1</sup> Here we make the devastating

discovery of all the ways in which we are captive to our own anxieties, driven by our need to control God and others and impose our own order on things. We begin to get a glimpse of the false self that functions primarily to keep us safe rather than helping us to know how to abandon ourselves to God. At this level, we must take a hard look at whether or not we really are trusting ourselves to God and to the flow of God's spirit, or whether we are completely bound up by defensive, self-protective patterns that only serve to help us maintain our fragile sense of security and well-being in the world.<sup>2</sup>

As painful as it is to be exposed at this level, it is evidence of God's grace. It shows that God is at work, leading us out of our bondage to sin into the freedom for love that is ours in Christ. At every level of the purgation process, we are led to the final and most transforming aspect of the self-examination process: confession, the discipline that results in our ultimate freedom.

### **The Freedom of Confession**

Confession is the end-game in the self-examination process, but it is the part we shrink from the most. Confession is the willingness to acknowledge and take responsibility not only for the outward manifestations of our sin, but also for the inner dynamics that produced the sinful or negative behaviors. Confession requires us to say it out loud to ourselves, to God and to the person (s) we have hurt and to take steps to renounce it for Christ's sake, even making restitution if that is needed.

There is a big difference between saying, "I'm sorry *if* I hurt you" and saying "I'm sorry I hurt you. What I realize now is that it was my own insecurity that produced such bad behavior. I have really prayed about this and I believe God is showing me how I can avoid doing that again. Will you forgive me?" Confession at this level is so

countercultural for so many reasons that it is hard to know how to begin to talk about it; however to stop short of confession is to stop short of the deepest levels of transformation.

Confession, when practiced fully, is personal (between me and God), it is interpersonal (with a trusted friend or confessor, with the person I have hurt or offended), and it is corporate (in the context of worship in community). It is the interplay between these three that keeps confession healthy and productive. It is all too easy to confess our sins to God privately or to make a general confession as part of a church service; it is much harder to confess our selfishness to a spouse, our jealousy to a friend, impatience with our children, our ego-driven pushing to our colleagues. How is it that we can enter into confession in a church service, but have such a hard time naming and confessing our sins face-to-face with someone we have hurt or offended?

“I’m sorry my jealousy kept me from joining you in celebrating your success.”

“I’m sorry that my idealism kept me pushing my agenda rather than being able to accept what is real.”

“I’m sorry that my out-of-control schedule has kept me so self-absorbed and distant that I wasn’t able to be there for you during that difficult time.”

One of the things we can know for sure is that if we are confessing our sin to God, but not to the people around us in the ordinary, nitty-gritty of my life, there is not much real spiritual transformation going on. I cannot help but think how transforming it would have been for the elder mentioned earlier if she could have acknowledged how her behavior had wounded another, if she could have reflected a bit about what was happening inside her to make such cutting remarks, offered a sincere apology and asked for forgiveness. How healing it would have been for that young staff person to be able to

grant forgiveness! And how instructive to have seen that kind of behavior modeled by a mature leader! *That* would have been real repentance and the fruit of it would have been much sweeter.

## **Practice**

Allow at least a half hour to pray through the following prayer so you can incorporate time for silence after each confession. In the silence, ask God to reveal any ways in which each confession might be true of you, but do not feel that you have to “get something” for each one. Allow this exercise to be characterized by gentle openness rather than any kind of pushing or forcing. When God does reveal something to you, quietly ask if there is anything you need to confess or to make right with any person (s) whom you have injured or offended. When you have had enough time with a confession, pray the refrain (the phrases printed in **bold**) and move to the next confession.

*Most holy and merciful Father:  
I confess to you that I have sinned by my own fault  
in thought, word and deed;  
by what I have done, and by what I have left undone.*

*I have not loved you with my whole heart, mind and strength. I have not loved my neighbors as myself. I have not forgiven others, as I have been forgiven. (Silence)  
**Have mercy on me, Lord.***

*I have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us. I have not been true to the mind of Christ. I have grieved your Holy Spirit. (Silence)  
**Have mercy on me, Lord.***

*I confess to you, Lord, all my past unfaithfulness:*

*...The pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of my life. (Silence)  
**I confess to you, Lord.***

*...My self-indulgent appetites and ways, and my exploitation of others, (Silence)  
**I confess to you, Lord.***

*...My anger at my own frustration, and my envy of those more fortunate than I, (Silence)  
**I confess to you, Lord.***

*...My love of worldly goods and comforts, my dishonesty in daily life and work, (Silence)  
**I confess to you, Lord.***

*Accept my repentance, Lord, for the wrongs I have done: for my blindness to human need and suffering, and my indifference to injustice and cruelty, (Silence)*  
**Accept my repentance, Lord.**

*For all false judgments, uncharitable thoughts toward my neighbors, and for my prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from me, (Silence)*  
**Accept my repentance, Lord.**

*Restore me, good Lord, and let your anger depart from me.  
Favorably hear me for your mercy is great.*

*Accomplish in me and in all your church the work of your salvation,  
That we may show forth your glory in the world.*

*By the cross and passion of your Son, our Lord,  
Bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection. Amen.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 82-86.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 82-85.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Phyllis Tickle, *Eastertide: Prayers for Lent through Easter* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 187,188.