

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 15 – The Confession of Sin

This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.

The Confession of Sin as response to the Word of God. We have seen how our Sunday worship has a “proclamation and response” form. In the first “Word of God” half, we listen to the proclamation of God’s word in Holy Scripture and then respond with sermon, creed, prayers and confession. Today in this note we explore the confession – not the whole subject of sin, confession and forgiveness, but the function that the General Confession (to give it its official name) plays in the liturgy of the Eucharist.

A “we confession,” not an “I confession.” When we come to church it is well to keep in mind that we are going to be part of a communal experience – common prayer, not personal prayer. All the parts of the Eucharist are voiced in the plural: “we believe,” “hear *our* prayer,” “we lift *our* hearts,” and “we confess that we have sinned against you.” Personal examination of conscience and private prayer to God are certainly important, and the Book of Common Prayer assumes that worshipers at the Eucharist tend to their spiritual lives at home in an “I/thou” relationship with God. The Prayer Book contains a sacramental rite for personal, private confession. But the Eucharist is a communal experience.

A school for sinners, a hospital for the hurt, a family for the lonely, a welcome for the homeless. The General Confession reminds us that church is all of those things. We come together before God not as a perfect people, but as people in need of salvation. In a famous parable (Luke 18:9-14), Jesus contrasts the righteous Pharisee whose prayer is a boast to God of how good he is, with the outcast tax collector who asks God only for mercy. Jesus’s point is that we need to come before God out of our emptiness and need, so that God can supply what we cannot. We pray the General Confession to remind us of this before we go to the Altar to open us to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

Forms of confession. The Episcopal Church uses a number of forms of Confession. The one in Rite I that we use at 8:00 is centered around the idea of “things done” and “things left undone.” The one we use at 10:00, from a supplemental resource called *Enriching Our Worship*, is phrased in terms of our disconnection from God: our failure to embrace his love or acknowledge his presence. Its picture of sin is broader and deeper, including “the evil that enslaves us” and “the evil done on our behalf.” Either approach is valid and helpful, both reflect Scriptural understandings of sin and the function of both is to bring us to the Table with humble hearts. Significantly, the Absolution after Confession leads directly to our exchange of the Peace.