

January 18, 2015

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Matthew 3:1-6

“Confessing their sin...”(3:6a) We’ve heard it many times in the Words of Assurance after a time of confession in worship: 1 John 1:9 – *“If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness!”* It is very reassuring. But look at the next verse in First John – *“If we claim we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar and His Word has no place in our lives.”* (v. 10)

Confession is relevant. It is relevant because it is good for us. It is relevant because, as Paul has said, *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* (Romans 3:23) He said, *“No one is righteous, not even one!”* (3:10) We need confession, because we need forgiveness. And we ought to know what it is we have been forgiven for. Listen to what David shared as he struggled with his conscience in Psalm 32 – *“Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord,’ and You forgave the guilt of my sin.”* (1-5)

God promises: *“He will not always accuse, nor will He keep His anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the East is from the West, so far He removes our transgression from us.”* (Psalm 103:9-12) The process of confession gives us hope.

Listen to one of the lessons Jesus gives. It’s about confession as much as it is about self-righteousness. *“He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus: “God, I thank You that I am not like other people – thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’”* (Luke 18:9-14) To confess is to humble ourselves. Sometimes it is relevant to remember that we are dust.

In his Letter, James tells us: *“Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”* (5:16) A problem can arise, though, when people begin a process of public confession. First of all, it can be very humiliating to confess your worst indiscretions in front of others. That can be permanently damaging. It can also be cathartic, though; but still, very embarrassing. Another thing that sometimes happens is that some people will make things up that are either just not true or are over exaggerated, either to make it seem as though they are equal to or worse than others, and then they claim, with great self-satisfaction, that they are just that much *more* forgiven. To me, instead of public confession, privately admitting our offenses before God, or, before one person, like a “confessor” or, a counselor is better. Some people I have known have said that it has helped to write it down in a personal diary, just to get it “out there, away, no longer holding it in. Some have written

down their sins and then thrown that paper into a fire, or, nailed it to a cross, after which, all those papers nailed to the cross were burned. But the whole idea is to get rid of our sins. To let them go. To repent!

Repentance! *“At that very time, there were some present who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but...unless you repent, you will all perish as they did! Or, those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did!”* (Luke 13:1-5) Repentance is relevant. There is a sense of urgency that Jesus gives to repentance in this passage from Luke 13. John the Baptist spoke very dramatically, saying, *“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!”* (Matthew 3:2) Repentance, in the Greek is *metanoia*, changing your mind. Actually, it is changing the way you think. Christianity takes thinking. Faith is not just as matter of feeling. There is a very relevant aspect of understanding something. We are to understand our lives in the light of a Savior, the One who saves us from sin and opens the Kingdom of Heaven for us. Sin cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And Christianity is the only religion that, in an ultimate way, has dealt with sin.

And John the Baptist was *“a voice in the wilderness.”* A voice out of nowhere....calling on the world to repent, to awaken to the reality of God’s Kingdom, and...to come. And *“People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were Baptized by him in the Jordan River.”* (Matthew 3:5—6)

We all need to heed that voice. Sometimes it echoes from deep within, reminding us that we need to change, that we should change, that we ought to do better, that there is something better for all of us. There is a Kingdom that has come near! Yet, *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* but, *“we are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus!”* (Romans 3:23-24)

Indeed, the Kingdom of Heaven is near!