



Confession is good for the soul, so the old adage goes. And, as with most folk wisdom, there is at least a kernel of truth in it.

Confession is part of our regular worship, whether it is on Sunday or during Morning or Evening Prayer. It is a part of our response to the lessons we hear from Scripture and part of our preparation for the Eucharist – the partaking of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

To stay mired in the mindset of confession, though, is a refusal to hear and to heed the words of John the Baptizer and of Jesus, himself.

Yes, John calls upon us to repent because the kingdom of God has come near. John urges us to examine our life and to make amends, to turn around, where needful, so that we are realigned with God.

John baptizing with water would have been familiar to those gathered to hear him. The Mikvah, or ritual bath, was and is an important part of Jewish life. The ritual bath was an outward and visible sign of cleansing that needed to occur in order to participate in certain parts of Jewish religious life.

We can relate to the cleansing power of a bath when we come in dirty and sweaty from a day working outside in the yard or from a long trip or from any number of other situations when a bath or shower helps us wash away the day or the event and emerge refreshed and ready to go on.

Water is essential to life, to keep us hydrated and also to wash away germs that might cause us to become sick. You've heard the story from Kim Roberts about her daughter Lauren's involvement with gathering water so that the people with whom she was working in Africa could cook or clean. The need for clean water is a challenge throughout much of the developing world.

For us, each time we baptize someone, we see the water being poured into the font and hear the familiar words: I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Baptism, for us, is the event which marks us as Christ's own. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever (BCP 308).

Baptism, whether John's baptism for the repentance of sins, or our own in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, is thus an outward and visible sign of God's love for us. We are claimed by God in the

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

water of baptism. Nothing we can do will separate us from the love of God. We are beloved children.

Why, then, is it so hard for so many of us to accept that we are enough just as we are? Why are we shamed or ashamed because we are not perfect?

Perhaps even more than being loved, we want to be accepted.

We seem to struggle, though, when told that God loves us- God accepts us- just as we are, warts and all.

Ponder during this Advent period why we have difficulty with being accepted. We need to accept being accepted.

Paul Tillich, one of the great theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said that “faith is the courage to accept acceptance. I am accepted by God as I am, not as I ought to be.”<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that we can blithely live a life that contradicts or ignores the teachings of Jesus if we want to be in right relationship with God and our neighbor. It does suggest, however, that whatever holds us back from living a “whole- hearted life” because of our own fear or shame at our humanness ought to be rethought.

As you continue your Advent journey towards Christmas, consider what might be holding you back from living a whole-hearted life. Our Confession of Sin includes these words: “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed... We have not loved you with our whole heart” (BCP 360).

Brene Brown is a professor at the University of Houston. The focus of her research is on shame and vulnerability and why it is so hard for so many of us to believe that we really are enough as we are. As an Episcopalian, reciting these words during Sunday worship, she later began to explore what differentiates those who have learned to live whole-heartedly from those who have not.

She says that “whole hearted living is about engaging our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It’s going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn’t change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.*”<sup>2</sup>

John the Baptizer, Isaiah the prophet, Paul the itinerant preacher and Jesus the Christ. Each of these lived a whole-hearted life. Each of these had moments of doubt, of vulnerability, of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich quoted by Patrick Howell. [Feasting on the Word](#). Yr. A, Col. 1. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.oprah.com/own-brene-brown-course/brene-course-bundle-landing.html?utm\\_source=BreneBrownFacebook&utm\\_medium=20130924&utm\\_campaign=1#intro](http://www.oprah.com/own-brene-brown-course/brene-course-bundle-landing.html?utm_source=BreneBrownFacebook&utm_medium=20130924&utm_campaign=1#intro) (Dec. 7, 2013).

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

despair. Just remember the words from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt. 27:46). Or, “not my will but yours” (Luke 22:42).

Living a whole-hearted life isn't without risk. The role of whistle-blower is fraught with danger. John the Baptizer was vulnerable and lost his head to Herod. John recognized that he had a role to play that put someone else at center stage: “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” But knowing that another was the true focus and point of the work that John was doing did not keep him from doing his part.

Isaiah the prophet received words from God that were proclaimed to all the world even though many did not believe or understand what he was saying. Isaiah fulfilled his role as harbinger of truth living his life as one who had been tapped by God to bring the word of peace and justice to a world filled with war, envy, greed and deceit.

And Paul needed that Damascus Road experience to understand that he, too, was worthy of being called by God to be a messenger of the way of truth and life and love. Whatever Paul's failings, and they were many, he knew that he was about the work of God to make Christ known to the nations.

Today we also remember Nelson Mandela. Another shining example of someone who lived from a place of worthiness. Someone who lived a whole-hearted life. A human like you and me with imperfections and times of anger, doubt, sadness – and with times when the knowledge that we are each children of God helps to make the day brighter and helps us to carry on with the tasks we have been assigned even when we might wish we were doing something else or even when we are frustrated that the task we have been set is not being accomplished as quickly or as easily as we want.

One reporter writing about Mandela wrote that: “His speech and actions embodied the principles of his Christian faith - forgiveness and reconciliation.”<sup>3</sup> Mandela's dream included that none suffer injustice, that there be peace in the world and that all are cared for. Mandela was driven to find ways for each person to be accepted for who he or she was and not because of skin color or economic status. And, part of that dream included each of us accepting that we are accepted through the love of God.

By accepting that we are accepted, we are enabled to accept others. We are enabled to love others. Patrick Howell writes that “We are all slow learners in the church. In the school for sinners, most of us are in the remedial class but the first and absolute necessity is that we accept that we are accepted. To grow in that awareness is to grow into the potential of truly accepting others.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/49834/20131205/nelson-mandela-dead-at-95-christian-faith-the-bedrock-of-his-extraordinary-life.htm#sthash.nwyOcuVW.dpuf> (Dec. 7, 2013)

<sup>4</sup> *Feasting*, 42.

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John the Baptizer accepted that he was accepted by God and thus was able to carry out his mission, even at the cost of his own life. Paul accepted that he was accepted by God and was able to carry out his mission of spreading the good news of Jesus the Christ. Both lived life whole-heartedly because they knew they were accepted by God, warts and all – and that gave them the courage to be vulnerable, to accept being laughed at or scorned by others who did not understand their message.

Bruce Epperly says that “Advent is a season that invites us to take adventures of the spirit. This is not an adventure for the faint hearted or those who seek a safe path. Spiritual adventures are for those who are willing to leave their personal, relational and congregational comfort zones to explore God’s pathways of possibility in our time. It is for those who seek new horizons of faith and spiritual transformation.” It is for those who are on the journey to living vulnerably in order to live whole-heartedly.

Let us pray:

Gentle God, you know that this is a season of hope and fear. It is a season when we are vulnerable as we hope for much and sometimes have to settle for less. It is a season when our past can cloud our future. Help us to trust in you to be a steadfast and faithful anchor. Help us to accept that you accept us as we are even as you offer us a way to live whole-heartedly with courage and compassion and understanding that we are enough because of the love of your Son, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**