

Seeking God Together: God Above Us
“Confessing”
Scripture: Psalm 32:1-8

Basic Claim of the Sermon: The practice of “confessing our sins” before God leads to/assists us in gaining self-knowledge. God knows the truth about us and confessing our sins allows us to move from hiding ourselves *from* God, to being hidden *in* God, who is our refuge and our source of joy.

One of the more significant books of Christian spirituality to have shaped me in my teenage years was St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. This text has become for many a classic literary paradigm for the Christian practice of “confessing” our sins to God, but it is much more than that. Inspired by the scriptures and especially the Psalms, St. Augustine sets the practice of confession within the much more basic human search to know God and to truly know ourselves. I don’t know exactly what ever led me to pick up this book years ago when I was around 16 years old—I seem to recall purchasing it one day in a little Christian bookstore beside a grocery store in the small city of Portage la Prairie, MB that I grew up in. At that time in my life, I was navigating the many questions about life that come with being a teenager. On top of that, however, this was also around the same time that a beloved uncle of mine had passed away suddenly, an event that ruptured my simplistic views of life, death, and the assurances that come from faith in God. I found myself drawn into a season of introspection and contemplation, a searching time in life during which I questioned faith, all the while growing in the recognition that I was being called to grow up and go deeper in life and in relationship with others and with God.

St. Augustine's *Confessions* shaped this period of introspection and contemplation in my life in a way that, looking back on it now, I realize was quite profound. This might seem odd at first glance. After all, Augustine wrote his *Confessions* over 1500 years ago and was in his 50s when he wrote it and there I was, 16 years old living the life of a teenager in the 1990s. What did 50-year-old Augustine living in the 4th and 5th century have to say that I could relate to as a 16-year-old living in the twentieth century? An awful lot, it turns out. I remember being especially drawn to one of Augustine's more famous lines from this text: "...you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet [or "restless"] until it rests in you." I suspect that many of us, throughout our lives, have found our hearts restless and for different reasons depending on our age and our season of life. In my teenage years, my heart was restless for different reasons than I find my heart restless because of now. Looking back, with everything going on at the time I think I was beginning to awaken to the reality of life as an uncertain and unpredictable journey of self-discovery. I had become, to quote another one of Augustine's profound phrases, "A question to myself." "Who was I?" And "where could I find fulfillment in my life?" And "where was God in all of my searching?"

Of course, a significant part of the way Augustine narrates the cause of his own restless heart is by way of his searching analysis of his tendency to sin throughout his life. All throughout *The Confessions*, Augustine narrates his own struggles with sin in a manner that echoes the Psalmists words from Psalm 32, our scripture for today that was dramatized in our Reader's theatre and set to that evocative music in our hymn of preparation:

Psalm 32:3-4 When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.

Augustine moves through the various stages of his life, searching deep in his memory to confess his transgressions. He begins first with what he imagines were his greedy and jealous infant cries for milk—we may rightly snicker at this one.¹ Later he moves to a description of his adolescent theft of pears from someone’s pear tree—a theft that Augustine notes was in no way tied to a desire to eat the pear (he apparently had a much better crop at home) but tied purely to a desire to steal. And so, he says, he did not feast on the pear but he “feasted on the sin.” Augustine moves on to his love affairs in university, his vain desires for popularity and public approval, his deceptive practices as a rhetorician, and on and on he goes.

While all of us might not relate to some or maybe any of the sins Augustine outlines in his *Confessions* and while we might think Augustine is being a bit too hard on himself at times—especially in his descriptions of the greed and jealousy present in his infant desire for milk—Augustine’s searching analysis of the desires and motivations at work in these formative life experiences is still profound and worthy of our attention. I think this is the case because in each instance of confession, Augustine does not confess for the sake of groveling in his sinfulness or in seeking a kind of easy absolution. Rather, he is seeking something much, much more important and that is greater self-knowledge under the gracious, forgiving, and loving gaze of God. If there is one lesson that I hope we can learn today from our consideration of

¹ While the doctrine of “Original Sin,” that all humans inherit sinfulness through the act of their conception, was taken for granted by Augustine, many Anabaptist-Mennonites rightly question it today. There are, of course, many possible articulations and justifications of a doctrine of Original Sin, some more scripturally grounded and credible than others. Most basically, a doctrine of original sin works inasmuch as what is being affirmed by it is that no child is born into a world and/or environment in which sin does not already have an impact and bearing upon their lives. How that relates to general or universal judgments about when a child can rightly be said to have to take personal responsibility for their sin is, of course, a matter of debate and contextual discernment.

“confessing” as a way of seeking God together, it is one that St. Augustine can teach us, namely, that **truly confessing our sins before God should lead us to greater self-knowledge.**

As I read Psalm 32 in preparation for today, I was struck especially by verse 2: Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and *in whose spirit there is no deceit*. That last line is what jumped out at me the most: “in whose spirit there is no deceit.” There are, of course, many ways we can have deceit in our spirit. We can have deceit in our spirit by intentionally choosing to deceive or lie to others, be they big or small lies. I wonder, though, whether most fundamentally all deception is first *self*-deception—deception in our spirit. When we are self-deceived, it naturally follows that we lack self-knowledge—knowledge about what drives us to certain actions, our hidden motivations, and our hidden desires. When we are self-deceived, we are, hiding ourselves from ourselves and most fundamentally hiding ourselves from God, just like Adam and Eve did in the garden when God asked, “where are you?” Confession of our sins is our spiritual path to forgiveness, yes, but that path moves us beyond self-deception, to know ourselves as God knows us – to hear the truth about ourselves under the gracious and loving gaze of God. St. Augustine makes this point powerfully in several places in his *Confessions*. Here is one particularly powerful quote:

“Is hearing the truth about oneself from you anything different from knowing oneself? And can anyone have this self-knowledge and still protest, “It is not true,” unless he himself is lying?” (Book X, 3, 3).

Contrary to how it is oftentimes portrayed, confessing our sins is so much more than a private practice that absolves us of a particular instance of wrongdoing. While King David is right to extol the grace and forgiveness of God—that God does not impute iniquity to him and invites him to find refuge in that grace and forgiveness—this does not mean God forgives sins

as if he were simply completing a transaction with David—David’s prayer doesn’t buy cheap forgiveness for himself. I think this can get lost in reading the Psalm, since the wording of the Psalm makes it seem so simple and immediate: “David struggled under the weight of his hidden sin, he confessed, and he felt happy. The end. Go and do likewise.” I don’t think matters of confession and forgiveness are so simple, however, for in confession, we refuse to hide from God and from ourselves those parts of ourselves that we so desperately want to hide—and perhaps have hidden for a long time. In confession, we aim at self-knowledge, both the good and the bad together, and this will draw us into a long journey of transformation.

Understanding the practice of confession as part of an ongoing journey of moving beyond self-deception to self-knowledge is as relevant today as it ever was. We continually wrestle in the church and in wider society with what “confessing our sins” means and what it should enable for the confessor and those to whom confession is addressed. We are continually learning that confession of sins is not a mechanistic practice or simple transaction that enables life and vocation to resume as usual, but rather a first step in hearing and telling the truth about ourselves, a first step in learning to live with the consequences of our actions, and a first step towards seeking a just forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with those around us whom our sins have impacted.²

While at sixteen years old I didn’t have the life experience that Augustine did at 50, and so neither quite the list of sins to confess that he did at that age, I think reading his *Confessions*

² This learning has been too often suppressed in cases of abuse in the church. Too often there has been a rush to grant a “cheap” forgiveness to those who have abused without giving adequate time for truth-telling, just reconciliation, and a reckoning with consequences that follow upon grievous actions like abuse. Confession and forgiveness for a perpetrator of abuse in the church should not enable a “blank-slate” kind of resumption of life as before.

helped me even at that early age become more aware of myself as person called to self-knowledge under the gracious gaze of God. Of course, today when I flip through Augustine's *Confessions* with the benefit of decades more life experience behind me, and yes, more sins to confess, I find myself appreciating Augustine's search for self-knowledge even more.

Recently, I picked up a new book styled after Augustine's *Confessions* that has helped me appreciate even more the understanding of "confessing" as the beginning of a journey of coming to know the truth about myself and the motivations for my actions. Natalie Carnes, a professor who has taught her students Augustine's *Confessions* for years, has written a profound book on the temptations that come with parenting and the sins that parents must confess. The book is called *Motherhood: A Confession* and, as a parent, I have found it both helpful and hard to read given the way that it exposes my parental failures.³ In it, Carnes both appreciatively adopts Augustine's desire for self-knowledge by focusing on the vocation of parenting, a part of life that he largely ignores. And instead of addressing her confessions to God, she addresses them to her daughter.⁴

Carnes seeks self-knowledge and greater intimacy with her daughter and with God through an examination of the wonders and the temptations that come with being a parent, from her child's conception and infancy onwards. Among the wonders Carnes examines are the parental joy of embracing children as a "gift of the Creator," a "sign of divine love" and "an image of grace."⁵ And among the temptations she examines are the parental desires to

³ Natalie Carnes, *Motherhood: A Confession* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

⁴ In his own way, Augustine acknowledges that by virtue of writing his confessions, he is confessing not only to God but to those who would read his confessions. Still, Carnes' *Motherhood* makes a helpful corrective, I think, to Augustine, in setting the practice of confession within a broader frame than just between the sinner and God.

⁵ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 24.

“dominate,” to “control,” and to “possess” our children in different ways. One particularly powerful moment she recalls comes from a scenario that many parents can relate to. Carnes’ daughter had hurt a friend and the expectation was that she would apologize to her friend. Listen to Carnes’ confession to her daughter about this episode and consider the way that it shows her search for self-knowledge:

We have been at this for some minutes now. You have grown more hysterical. You won’t apologize. You can’t, you insist. You want pink lemonade, you wail. It’s not fair, you howl; you didn’t mean to hurt her. I wonder if your tortured cries echo through the café. I try not to be swayed by your pitiful moans. I am Lady Justice, deaf and blind with my scales, unyielding, unmoved, unmerciful.

Yet I can see that my hardness bruises you. I know I’m not helping you toward the good but entrenching you in your own misery. Now, however, my frustration is buttressed by my pride. I am past the point of changing tactics. I will not bend to your bad behavior. Seeing you commit to your own misery only hardens me further. Maddened that you are choosing unhappiness over obedience, I am enveloped by wrath.

Your anger shakes your whole body with its violence, while my icy rage freezes any floes of tenderness that trickle through my heart. As you continue to resist me, I feel my cold fury mounting its own violent force. I ask you again to say, “I’m sorry.” Facing me, you counter that you cannot and propose instead to tell your friend that I want you to apologize to her. The absurdity of this non-apology magnifies my rage, and I erupt in moralized lecture.

Going into this confrontation, I had multiple motives. I wanted you to flourish and be good. I wanted you to obey me and make me look like a good mother. But the latter reasons have eclipsed the former ones. All I want is for you to do what I say. *Libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate, possesses me. I have lost sight of your good.⁶

Carnes describes a mundane scenario that many parents can relate to—I sure know I can. But what is exceptional about her description of this episode with her daughter is her insight into the inner motivations of her spirit and the way that a parent can move from self-awareness and right desire to self-deception and right desire twisted by sinful desire. The desire starts out good—to help her child flourish in relationship, learn the good of recognizing when we’ve hurt

⁶ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 99-100.

others, to accept the wisdom of parents—but the desire turns towards a desire for obedience alone, for its own sake, and rage over the child’s refusal. What Carnes’ shows us is an example of coming to greater self-knowledge through confession and it leads to an affirmation of the good that Carnes wants to seek to live out as a parent—the good of learning to receive our children as gifts to be nurtured, cultivated, and then released to grow, rather than possessed and controlled.⁷

Confession and the journey to greater self-knowledge is a practice that will look different for different people. There are several different tools that you might find helpful in this journey: the Enneagram is a tool some of you might have heard of or used in this regard; it can help in identifying those hidden aspects to ourselves that drive our actions, both good and bad. There are other more basic daily practices that can be helpful on the journey to self-knowledge through confession: practices such as the daily examen or a daily review, where you take stock of your day each evening, laying out before God what you did, how you felt, and how you lived well and where you messed up. We need tools like these, because in our different seasons of life, in young age, as parents, in the prime of our careers, or in our later years of life, we all find ourselves struggling from time to time with deceit in our Spirit, with self-deception. Maybe our first clue to this struggle will come from a restless heart. If so, may we listen to that restlessness and let it draw us into a journey of confession and so to a greater knowledge of ourselves under the gracious and loving gaze of God. AMEN.

⁷ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 96.