

SERMON: Confession is Good for the Soul

TEXT: Luke 18:9-14

I've recently begun watching a series on Netflix called, *The Good Place*. The very first scene shows a young woman opening her eyes and finding herself in a waiting room of sorts. The large wall across the room has a message: "Welcome. Everything is fine." Just then a nice looking, well dressed man steps out of his office, smiles and calls her by name, "Eleanor? Come on in." He proceeds to tell her that she has died. Among her many questions is the one we all would ask if it wasn't immediately obvious. She appeared nervous and hesitant to name the options out loud as she asked, "Am I... – her thumb pointed up?" "Or... – thumb pointed down?". He is happy to tell her that she has made it to *the Good Place*.

On their tour of the neighborhood, the nice looking man shows Eleanor the house he has designed especially for her, in the style she likes, painted with her favorite colors, and with paintings of clowns on the walls – because he knows she likes clowns. Just then, another man enters. Chidi is from Senegal, and he is introduced to Eleanor as her "soulmate." The first man leaves to give them some time to get to know one another.

Chidi reveals that in life he was a professor of philosophy and ethics, and once Eleanor believes he will stand by her, she confesses that there's been a mistake. She's not a civil rights lawyer, she didn't feed starving children in Africa, and she hates clowns. She admits that she doesn't belong in the Good Place.

She begs Chidi to keep her secret and teach her how to be a better person, so that she can prove she's worthy of the Good Place and avoid being sent to the Bad Place.

As the story progresses, it turns out there are four people who don't belong there, and they begin working together, helping each other to become better people.

The show is funny, odd, and absurd. But it is also thought-provoking for those who want to go deeper, and for people like me, who make their living pondering the question, "What does the Lord require of you?"

Although I haven't yet seen all the episodes of the Good Place, it seems that the message of the series is really not about where we go after we die. It's not about whether we qualify for the Good Place or miss the mark and go to the Bad

Place. It's not a competition, and there is no reward for being the best person. The point is that we help each other along the way. We can't get there alone. We go together, or we don't go at all.

The Gospel-writer Luke, wrote that Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” The Pharisee in the story was one such person, as demonstrated in his prayer: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

This is not a prayer. This is a resume. The Pharisee has imagined a competition in which he comes out on top. He has no awareness of his own shortcomings. The only attention he gives to others is so that he can judge them and look down on them. While his prayer appears to be one of thanksgiving, it's really just an implied request that God confirm his exceptional goodness.

The tax collector, on the other hand, assumes a posture of humility. He won't even look up to heaven as he beats his breast and prays, “God, be merciful to

me, a sinner!” This man is fully aware that there is nothing he can do to help himself. Only God’s mercy will save him.

We all know which person we are supposed to emulate. But just in case we’re not sure, Jesus concludes the parable, saying, “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.”

Well, how do we humble ourselves? Humility can be hard to define and harder to learn. Sometimes we think it’s just a matter of responding to a compliment by hanging your head in an “aww shucks” kind of way. Sometimes we think humility means we shouldn’t take credit for our accomplishments and successes.

I think an important aspect of humility is just what this tax collector demonstrates: confession. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Of course, admitting we are sinners in this very general, all-encompassing way is a lot easier than owning up to every single vice we have, every time we neglect to help someone or every time we harm another person, every act of

selfishness and greed. Nobody wants to begin making such a list, perhaps out of fear that we would never finish. And we hesitate to confess our sins out loud, even to God who already knows.

It is astounding to me how many celebrities and public figures are rarely willing or able to take responsibility for their own actions. The examples that we see nearly everywhere we look shows people in high places always blaming someone else. "It's not my fault." "I did nothing wrong." "I knew nothing about it." "It was consensual." "I was framed."

One of my proudest moments as a parent was when my son was about ten years old. He cheated on a math test. BUT, he confessed to his teacher, and to us, that he had allowed another student to look at his paper. He knew it was wrong and he admitted it.

I remember a time in junior high school, when my Catholic friend, Jenny, was in a panic at lunch time. "I have to go to confession after school. You gotta help me think of something to say!" She wanted to say something believable, but minor. Not something that she actually did, necessarily, and not so bad as to be embarrassing or cause the priest to impose too great a penance.

I also remember an adult from a former church tell me that she didn't pray the prayer of confession from the bulletin because it "didn't apply to her." I don't know if she was referring to the particular prayer from that Sunday or the prayer of confession in general. I do know that ever since then I've tried to be extra vigilant about choosing or writing prayers that don't get too specific about our sins.

But confession, whether private or public, whether individual or corporate, is good for the soul. It's also good for our relationship with God. Jesus said that the tax collector who confessed his sin "went to his home justified." Justification is a significant theological concept too massive to be dealt with here. But in the simplest terms, to be justified is to be made right with God. Brought back into right relationship. The most important thing to understand about this is that we cannot accomplish it on our own. We are justified only through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Furthermore, confession is good for our relationships with others. Not only good, but necessary. It brings greater understanding. It develops our ability to feel compassion. It empowers us to help one another to become better people. As one theologian wrote, "The beautiful gift that comes with confessing our need not only

to God, but to and with one another, is that grace and mercy come to us through fellow sinners.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, 10-21-19)

Like the characters in *The Good Place*. All of them are in the process of facing up to the mistakes they made while they were alive. Through it, they have bonded together, become friends, and found ways to help one another become better people.

I know I've mentioned this before, but it's worth repeating. It is a South African philosophy called Ubuntu. Translated, it means, “I am, because you are.” It speaks to the fact that we are all connected, and that one can only grow and progress through the growth and progression of others.

CONFESSION IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL, for life, for relationships. Here and now, and in the hereafter. Together, may we work to make each other better. To the glory of God!

AMEN.