

Confession

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Preacher: AnaYelsi Velasco-Sanchez

[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. All right. So as Matt said, my name is Ana Jelsey. Saying good evening is not going to be the first time.

I'm hoping for some participation, so get ready. Wake up a little bit, shake it out if you need to, whatever you got to do. So during last Sunday's sermon, our favorite Brit over here asked us all to reflect on how our individual actions have perpetrated or caused us to benefit from racism and white supremacy.

And the necessary next step is moving from an internal acknowledgement of those things to an external confession. So that's what I'm here to talk about tonight. Really fun topic of confession.

Confession, at its most basic definition, simply means to acknowledge. It doesn't necessarily indicate any other behavior, except for the admittance that an act was done, that something did occur.

And as a church, we rarely stop to make even those simple utterances. We choose to either ignore our role in something or focus only on solutions and the future.

[1 : 15] For example, there's an inclination on the modern church's part to try to interject ourselves into movements for justice. And I'm not saying that's an inherently bad thing. We should be involved in movements for justice.

But without stopping to critically analyze our or the church's role, there's a problem. We have to acknowledge how we've helped to build or maintain these systems that made those movements for justice necessary in the first place.

If we're being painfully honest, we can't engage in the sort of critical analysis that needs to happen because we've yet to even take the step of admitting what our part was in the first place.

Essentially, what we struggle to do is confess, both as individuals and as the church. We have a hard time naming our participation in things like racism and white supremacy, xenophobia, colorism, anti-indigeneity, and anti-blackness.

We struggle to even say those words in the church. So why is it hard to identify and confess our place in these stories? Well, for one thing, it affects our sense of self, our self-image, especially our Christian inclination to be seen as just and good people.

[2 : 32] Second, church culture often conditions us to focus on our individual sin versus our collective sin. If we don't believe we have any individual role, we're not likely to seek out a collective confession because we've already absolved ourselves of responsibility, of any individual culpability.

It's not in our conditioning to then go out and try and find new ways to be implicated or responsible for something. So what do we mean by individual and collective sin? And why do we need to consider both?

That's the question I want us to think about tonight. So there's this quote I want to share with you that we can put up from Gustavo Gutiérrez, Peruvian liberation theologian. There are not two histories.

Oh, I can. It's so high above me. I didn't know it was there. There are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, juxtaposed or closely linked. Rather, there is only one human destiny.

Gutiérrez here, what he's actually doing is challenging dualistic thinking. He's talking about two histories in that there's earthly, secular events, and then that there's the sacred history of salvation.

[3 : 38] But what I love about his words in a lot of liberation theology is that you're able to read and experience new things within it. So I love these words because they challenge us to see history in its fullness.

That challenge can extend to the dual histories we've created where we claim that there is both a racist world while also coexisting an anti-racist world, these sort of two things that can't be true at the same time.

What Gutiérrez's words make me think of is the way that the church and society, we fractured reality. We attempt to create these alternative histories where colonizers become explorers, where native territory becomes unclaimed land, where ancient traditions become satanic and savage, where enslaved black people become workers from Africa that are just a part of the pattern of immigration, and so on, until everything has been sanitized and whitewashed and essentially made sacred and holy when in fact they weren't.

They were sin. So part of that, you know, wanting you to interact, what is sin? What's sin? I know somebody here went to Sunday school, had a Bible study, something.

What is sin? I love you so much, Erin. The really go-to issue is anything that separates me from God.

[5 : 12] Like that is the go-to Sunday school answer. Sin is anything that separates me from God. It's the drinking and it's the sex and the profanity and the greed and the anger. That's what separates us from God, according to many a Bible study.

It's all of those personal choices. It's the individual sin. It's the individual sin. But when it comes to issues such as racism and white supremacy, the sin is always also collective.

Because racism requires a system and a power structure in order to survive. Having prejudice thoughts may make you a bigot, but that alone doesn't create racism.

Were we to live in a truly anti-racist world, a person acting on their racist thoughts would be acting outside the norms of society. We would know with certainty that they were going to face consequences as a result of their racism.

This is not true for the society that we actually live in. We internalize and participate in collective sinful structures. And that may or may not include individual sinful acts.

[6 : 17] It's the difference between sin being anything that separates me from God and sin being anything that separates us from God. We need to, I want us to consider the words of Bryan Stevenson, and I believe I gave them on a slide.

Yes. Bryan Stevenson is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and the creator of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. It's also known as the Lynching Memorial.

In Berlin today, you can't go 100 meters without seeing a marker or a stone that was placed next to the home of a Jewish family that was abducted during the Holocaust.

The Germans want you to go to the Holocaust Memorial because they want to express their awareness that something horrific happened and that it can never happen again. Steven goes on to say, We don't talk about slavery.

We don't talk about lynching. We don't talk about segregation. We have to acknowledge the places where terror lynchings took place. Those aren't places you can go to in this country and be confronted with the history of racial terror and violence and walk out and say never again.

[7 : 26] And because nobody says never again, what we see happening is, well, it is happening again. And so we have to do that truth-telling work. Then we have to hold the truth.

Then we have told the truth. Only when we've told the truth can we begin the hard part of repair. So the question then becomes, what is it that we have to repair?

What truths do we have to tell about our collective sin? Where has the church been during the history of race in the United States? So I want to share a bit of where we have been in the history of the U.S.

Giving credit first to a friend of mine who helped me compile a lot of this when we worked together a number of years ago. So Miles Markham, if you don't know who Miles is, Miles is a Hapa, mixed-race, trans-Christian and activist.

And I love and admire them very dearly. I count them among some of the better theologians that I've encountered. And Miles is a part of a group that is featured in and helped consult on a documentary that's coming out this month on Netflix called Pray Away.

[8 : 38] And it looks into the relationship between the church and reparative therapy. So that's just a shout-out to Miles for the incredible work that they do. And to say that this is part of their wisdom and is a co-labor of ours.

So, the history of race in the U.S. We begin with the church's role in promoting Native American genocide. Puritans in the 17th century came to what became the U.S.

And they talked about a city on a hill. And they used words from Jesus. They connected those words to Deuteronomy. And they inspired colonists to possess the land throughout the country and eventually move and conquer the West.

And we can look at the writings from the people during that time. And they used language like heathens and savages and primitives to describe the Native people that they encountered. We can look at those words and we can see the individual sin present in that.

But the collective sin is in how Puritans, deeply religious folk, did little to nothing to push back against that to prevent mass murder from happening.

[9 : 42] And further, they thought it was qualified by God giving them the land. Manifest destiny was popularized. And through collective virtue, they imagined themselves as God's chosen people.

They believed they needed to expand across the continent because of the premise that they were on a mission from God. And any so-called Canaanites that didn't convert, well, then it was completely acceptable to slaughter them.

While it's really easy to read those sort of quotes and sermons from Puritan leaders who hold an ethic like that and to find them unconscionable, what we're really going to miss is that they were only inheriting and upholding what structurally had already been put in place that had been playing out since 1492, which was this belief that Native life was subhuman.

Then we can move to the transatlantic slave trade and the church's role in upholding slavery. We can make the mistake of perceiving only individual Christian slaveholders as culpable for the mistreatment of enslaved people, for their understanding that to be black or be of African descent legally made a person less than human.

But collective sin manifests in the fact that the industry of slavery was legalized in the U.S. and it was done through theistic and Christian people. It was even seen as necessary in order to live into God's design for this promised land.

[11 : 09] While some denominations and mission agencies explicitly supported that, and they commissioned slaveholders and slavery defenders, others who might have considered themselves in theory pro-abolition, they felt compelled by their own sense of piety and redemption, coupled with the Bible's failure really to say anything against slavery, that the practice was acceptable for now, that it wasn't something to challenge in this moment.

They were not joining movements like those of Quakers and evangelicals happening at the time to address slavery. You have folks like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, who are usually described as the fathers of the Great Awakening, exhorting their fellow slave owners, telling them, you know, be nice to enslaved people, teach them to read, definitely convert them to Christianity.

To them, equality for Black and Native people was, again, something for the future, and right now the concern was conversion. It was saving their soul. In this individual sin mode, the priority becomes the salvation of the soul and not the body, and it doesn't end there.

We move into the growth and the spread of Christianity during the Reconstructionist era. Following the Civil War and the abolition of the African slave trade, you have evangelists like D.L. Moody, who's calling for acceptance and unity between Northern and Southern whites, ignoring the fact that Black people are being denied political rights and economic well-being.

You have them praising the courage and commitment of both the Union and the Confederate soldiers, as if the causes they were fighting for were morally equivalent. Sort of a good people on both sides argument, if you will.

[13 : 08] They relieved white Northerners from further responsibility, from any need for soul-searching, for any concern with their personal sinful disposition or behavior.

There was no moral mandate to advocate for the economic or political welfare of the people they had previously enslaved. Revival happened through the teaching that salvation is an escape from the retributive justice and wrath of God.

The emphasis was on where the soul goes to die. Again, a theme that we're seeing. We're forgetting the body and concerning ourselves with the soul. The phrase saving souls actually came out of this time period, and it became really easy for Christians to reduce people down to souls and not their body.

It therefore promoted a lack of care for the body and others and any sense of personal compassion or social justice, which then brought us into the Jim Crow era, into segregation.

Christians resisted equality for people of color in a lot of ways. Some ministers would preach an overt biblical sanction for segregation. They would preach for the restriction of voting rights, for housing discrimination, which Matt got into last week, for various other social inequities.

[14 : 28] Most preachers took a more subtle approach, and they just remained silent about black and brown equality. But they condemned the faith-based civil rights activism that was starting to come out, and they called it a prostitution of the church for political purposes.

At the same time in our country, the social gospel was beginning to take root. So we start to see progressives and mainline churches, and they're taking up this cause for social justice.

But what we see is the pastors who embrace that cause, they're being outright fired. The lay organizations that were formed to keep these churches, lay organizations are formed to keep these churches segregated, and a lot of individual congregations began to adopt mandates.

They rejected people from certain positions or outright rejected people as worshipers based on the color of their skin. When school integration became unavoidable, it was white Christians who were encouraged to divest from public schools in favor of building their own new private schools that can continue to uphold segregation.

Billy Graham, who's seen as one of the fathers of the evangelical movement, was pro-segregation, and it wasn't until years later, when it became the law of the land, that he started to roll that back.

[15 : 49] It's individual sin when a person participates like that in the active, intimidating, the threatening, and the violence towards people of color and towards those disenfranchised by Jim Crow.

But it's collective when Christians do nothing to challenge the fact that Jim Crow existed in the first place. It's important to note that these Christians believe these things because collectively, the conscience of the church had essentially not moved forward at all.

We hadn't arrived in a different place. Throughout each of these major moments in time, we were still focused on individuals repenting, on individuals becoming Christians, on individuals knowing that the idea that if you just loved your neighbor enough, it would just cover a multitude of sins and everything would be resolved.

That is what we focused on. So then you find yourself in the era of the 70s, the 80s, and the 90s. And this is where you have the rise of the moral majority, which depending on the age range here, that's a familiar thing.

Who are my 30-somethings? All right. So you have the rise of the moral majority happening, and it's a distraction from racism in the church. You have 1979, you have Jerry Falwell, and the new Christian right is forming.

[17 : 07] And they're all galvanized around this idea of prayer in school and about arguing against abortion, against gay marriage, against the Equal Rights Amendments. And although it was trying to distinguish itself from its predecessor of fundamentalism, this was essentially evangelicalism that was still a broad rejection of the social gospel.

It still interpreted the Bible through a critical lens and failed to promote the idea, or still didn't interpret the Bible through a critical lens and failed to promote any ideas of social reform.

So both of these moments emerged to defend the authority of the Bible as God's word. Again, not an inherently bad thing. And as a reaction against the social gospel. It's individual in this time when white Christians are treating religious minorities poorly, when they're treating women and LGBTQ people and more progressive interpreters of the Bible negatively.

That's individual sin. It's collective sin when our perspective on that small handful of Christian topics has now become the totality of Christian ethics.

Even when other white evangelicals choose to not align themselves with the moral majority, a lot of them still opted out of social justice in order to prioritize the individual soul salvation.

[18 : 27] Again, this consistent theme through generation and generation of the church. And that led to this idea of, well, if we're going to focus on racism at all, we're going to solve it with colorblindness and personal relationship.

That's the prescription for racism. So throughout the 80s and the early 90s, in response to like, it's getting harder and harder to ignore these racial disparities. So in response to that, people start to talk about, okay, we need a new way forward.

And they suggest that it will, again, if you all just treated one another equally, if you only saw one another as siblings in Christ, and if that was more important than any other identities you held, well then racial privilege and racism and these kind of concepts, they would just fall away.

They would no longer exercise the power they once did. So white Christians embrace this message, this just focus on Jesus' message, just see one another as Christians' message, and kind of leaned into this idea that if we just believe that, we could all get over this race thing.

It has not, I don't know if you noticed, it has not as of yet worked. And then finally, we find ourselves in post-9-11, and we see this rise in xenophobia.

[19 : 46] We see this rise in anti-immigrant sentiment. We see a rise in Islamophobia. And we see the building of organizations like CCDA, the Christian Community Development Association, and popularization and branding of racial reconciliation, which still today is like the banner for many when talking about race.

Following 9-11, and the wave of Islamophobia and xenophobia, and increased race-based violence, organizations like CCDA, and I'm not picking on them, I'm just giving an example, they primarily developed their base among Christians, and white evangelicals, and progressive Christians, and POC, and they began to make their way into mainstream culture.

So it started in one pocket of the church and started to make its way into the mainstream. And it was through the popularization of these sort of movements, these Christian development movements, through urban ministry, through like bridge-building organizations, that suddenly you had all these white pastors inviting folks of color, inviting pastors and clergy of color, and speakers, and saying, we have someone, we have reconciliation practitioners, and we're bringing them in, and we're going to have them come and speak at our event and in our congregations.

And the message was, as long as you invite these folks in, we're going to talk, we're going to hear each other, we'll just learn to see past our differences, and that alone will help us work it out. But the collective sin problem here is that it continues to assume that only individuals who are responsible for overcoming their individual prejudices, it assumes that we all have something to learn from one another that we would otherwise not know if we weren't in conversation.

And that finally brings us to the current moment, where we're beginning to uncover this idea that reconciliation is not enough. Despite 200 years of the church talking about race, it's only been in the last decade, really, that we've begun to publicly acknowledge that there's a structural component to these problems, that there's structural issues that lie at the core of it.

[21 : 52] And that's what's been missing in order for us to live out a gospel that both saves people from their sin and empowers whole bodies of believers to participate in the reform of the church and the reform of society.

Before there can be any actual reconciliation, and this is a whole other sermon, I might argue that reconciliation reconciliation is not the goal and not a concept, because when were we ever truly reconciled?

Other sermon. But we have to start first by dealing with the collective sin and the structural ways in which they play out. So in each of these historical moments, individuals committed racialized violence, while collectively, the church, it endorsed it and promoted the violence, or chose to remain silent, or chose only to focus on spiritual things which unite us and not the urgent needs of people of color in the bodies they currently reside in.

The sin of the church is not seeing all of its people as more than simply souls, but also as body and minds. And again, as Matt shared with us last week, we didn't all do each of these things.

We may not all derive privilege from each of these things, but nearly all of us are implicated in some way in the fallout. I'm a brown immigrant woman, and I still have the capacity to engage in anti-blackness.

[23 : 20] A light-skinned person of color still has the capacity to engage in colorism against a darker-skinned person of color. A black individual who is a citizen of the U.S.

still has the capacity to be anti-immigrant. We all potentially have some culpability in the history I just named. And if we're a part of the church, we have to acknowledge that our individual identities aside, we can't be held apart when the church was called to account for its actions.

So thankfully, we have stories in Scripture that show us what collective confession ought to look like. In Daniel 9, 4 through 6, I believe I, did I get that?

Daniel confesses the sins of his people that he himself was not personally responsible for. He says, Our Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments who have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances.

We have not listened to your servants, the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors and to all the people of the land. Scripture shows us that like individual sin and individual confession, collective sin and collective confession hold legitimacy as a spiritual practice.

[24 : 51] So as we work out the complexities of confession, we need to be asking ourselves, what does it look like on both an individual and a collective level? A crucial part of that process is gaining clarity on what confession actually is and what it is not, the pitfall of the performative act of confession and the limitations of it.

Confession cannot be a standalone act. As you're seeing during this sermon series, it is a step, it is a part of a process. There's a quote I want to share, I know I did give this one, from Gregory Baum and the way Gregory phrases it is, those who have inflicted pain on others who have participated directly or indirectly and acts of oppression must recognize the evil origin of their power and privilege, repent, and be willing to make restitution a process.

When treated as the end goal rather than a part of a process that includes things like repentance and restitution, confession becomes merely performative. Admitting to being or behaving xenophobic or anti-black becomes about having a way to disprove an accusation of those things.

Essentially, how could I be anti-black? I admitted it, therefore, I'm not like those other people. Admitting it somehow is supposed to give me distance and shield me from critique.

Never moving beyond that sort of performative act of confession means we essentially succeed in stalling the work of anti-racism. If I say I did a thing and that's enough to end a conversation, then we're never challenged to act on this new truth that I just named.

[26 : 41] It never moves us further along in the process. So in two weeks, you're going to hear about repentance. But the thing I want you to remember tonight is that repentance and confession are two separate acts within the same process.

They are not the synonyms we often treat them as. There are two key differences between these steps. To begin with, repenting means you're experiencing remorse for the act.

You're not just acknowledging that it happened, that it's a truth. You feel regret for your part in it. And that regret is what then moves people into changing course. Confession, as I mentioned, is just the acknowledgement.

I don't need to feel any guilt. I don't even really need to make an evaluation of my acts. None of that has to occur for confession to actually be possible. The second difference is that confession can be imposed.

Repentance cannot. Regardless of our own feelings of regret as individuals or as a group, we can still be put in a position where we have to admit what has occurred.

[27 : 52] I want to be a part of a church that makes it impossible for us to turn from the truth. I want it to be uncomfortable to rest on the lies we've told ourselves in the past.

And I know that that means that some people are going to be faced with the truth and they're not going to be ready to repent. They might even be angry at being forced to acknowledge it. But the acknowledgement still occurs.

People are still put in a position to examine their own actions. What happens next on a heart level for them? Isn't it mine or your responsibility? All we are responsible for is creating an environment that is ripe for confession and that is vigilant about not allowing confession to turn into the end game.

As Latina theologian Elizabeth Condi Frazier says, anger and tears create the space for the work of the spirit. They are the groaning of the spirit for renewal or creation, an expression of compassion thus revealing a deep spiritual well.

To fear our tears or to suppress our anger is to block the power of the spirit springing forth from within our spiritual wells to resist death and to sustain and renew life.

[29 : 07] I don't want us to fear the anger or the tears that are a part of this process. Creating space for the work of the spirit it takes time and intention and grace.

I'd like to share a poem with you from Father Ken Untener. called prophets of a future not our own. It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

[30 : 08] This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. we lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete but it is a beginning a step along the way an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers not master builders. Ministers not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. In the coming weeks you're going to hear sermons that talk about where we go from here but tonight what I would like us to do is just learn to sit with truth.

I want to invite you into a moment of silent reflection. I want you to take the next few minutes and read a prayer of confession from the Jewish Center for Justice. Think about your individual confessions.

[31 : 19] Think about our communal confessions. After, I'm going to invite you to raise those confessions up. My encouragement to you is to lean into being bold, being honest, and being specific with the truths you lift up tonight.

So with that we're going to go ahead and just take a moment of silence. initiative and Beit and As you're ready, I invite you to lift up these prayers of confession.

I do mean verb like autoplay. I'll give you another moment.

All right. I want to close us out with a prayer from Kenji Kuramitsu. This is from his booklet of Uncommon Prayer. Against false peace, O merciful God, grant that we, through the strength of your divine hand, might protect and serve one another.

Make all forms of hatred cease. Unmask all systems of corruption and power. Drive out all fears and prejudices in our day. You are as near as our breath and as close to us as the contours of our hearts and minds.

[34 : 22] May your presence be a balm to those who are suffering and a bright flame to those who are causing injury. Rupture the status quo of perennial violence that infects our land and teach us, through your divine word, to reject the lies of any false peace in favor of the presence of your dangerous justice.

Amen. Amen.