

Smoked out into confession's healing lightness

Michael A. King

During 2002 the world recoiled as the Roman Catholic church found itself drawn into a scandal so widespread it almost seemed that with another twist or two the pope himself would be implicated. My point is not to show disrespect for the pope, or to hit the Catholic church when it's down, but rather to allow its trauma to help us think through how we, sinners all, of whom I am chief, engage our wrong behaviors. That is a far larger question than one sermon can address, so I want to focus on confession. But even confession is a big topic, so I'll simply explore three phases it can include: being smoked out, claiming our wrong behavior, and experiencing the lightness of healing within community.

Being smoked out is what the Catholic church has faced. And in its travails we hear echoes of what might be seen as the first

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confession, recorded in Genesis 3:8–10.

Adam and Eve have just done their wrong thing. They have eaten the forbidden fruit, in anticipation of something fine. Now they are uneasy indeed; the aftermath doesn't feel so good after all.

God comes looking for them, at the time of the evening breeze, according to Genesis 3:8. What a striking detail: the evening breeze. Day is dying in the west, to echo the

old song; the heat of day is over, the fireflies are starting to flicker, and the cool breezes to stir. A quiet time, a magic time, a time when world and we in it feel once more childlike and innocent.

But not this time. This time, for the first time, innocence is gone. So when God calls for them, Adam and Eve hide, there in the bushes where the evening breeze, instead of caressing them, makes their guilty naked bodies shiver. But when God says, "Where are you?" they have no choice but to respond. The man

explains to God, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Phase one of confession is not pretty. It does us little credit. We are confessing not because we want to but because we've been found out. We have done the wrong thing and then have tried to get on with our lives, as we in North America like to say, but God has come in with the evening breeze to smoke us out. And we explain that we were afraid, because we were naked, which is how it feels when we've done wrong, so we hid.

We feel most naked when we sin most. Although the sin was minor compared to my worst adult choices, I felt naked indeed when, after month upon month of stealing my mom's grocery money to buy comics, my conscience could bear the weight no

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longer, smoked me out, and forced my confession. Though I had not hidden in a garden, I had hidden hundreds of ill-bought comics on top of the hall wardrobe.

Adam and Eve feel so naked because they have violated the very core of God's commandments, trying out an aspect of God's creation God has said is off-limits, with hopes that it would turn out well. Something like this is what one accused priest seems to have done, as decades ago, at the founding of the Man-Boy Love Association, he proclaimed that this type of love was a good thing and society needlessly restrictive.

When we commit sins like this, we can't help but hide. We can see no easy way

forward, no solution without heavy consequences, so we flinch from facing what we have done. But God keeps after us, and, often enough, whether through external consequences or internal shame, smokes us out. As bad as the experience is likely to be, however, it can be a severe mercy, because once forced to respond to God we can move beyond merely hiding, whether from God or our own judging gaze.

Then we may be able to take a second step. At their June 2002 deliberations, the Catholic bishops began to take this step. They not only admitted they were hiding from God, they claimed

their sin. They actively and penitently said they and their church and its priests had done wrong. They took sin on themselves rather than hiding any longer from it and from God's finger pointing at them. Here the first glimmers of something new emerged—not the end of the story, because consequences of sin like this can unfold across lifetimes, but the beginning of a different chapter in which God could again be a partner in their journey and not the one from whom they hid.

The bishops were doing something powerful and ancient. For generations, according to the story told in the Old Testament, the people of Israel had lived against God in basic ways. So God sent them into exile from their Promised Land, much as he had sent Adam and Eve into exile from the Garden of Eden or as he sends the Catholic hierarchy into exile from its sense of unquestioned power.

Now the people have gathered to confront their sins. This is how Nehemiah 9:1–2 describes it: “Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.”

The specifics of what the Israelites had to do to atone for their sin are not what interest me here, though specifics always matter to people beginning to move past what they have done wrong. Rather, what catches my attention is how clearly they confronted the weight of what they had done wrong, as the Catholic bishops did at long last, and as I did after stealing so much grocery money. They stopped eating. They put on sackcloth, much as if we were to wear rough clothes made from old feed bags, and even placed dirt on their heads. They let themselves experience the depth of their wrongdoing. They confessed it. They said what they had done wrong. They even said what their ancestors had done wrong.

As heavy as this experience of claiming their sin must have been, right at that point we glimpse a third phase of confession: the healing lightness within community that happens when the burden drops away. As heavy as its early phases can be, when confession has been truly accomplished, what a shift in mood can ensue. Plenty of scriptural texts tell of celebration after heaviness. And it resonates in my experience of confronting my own worst

sins. Precisely at the point of confession, the mood begins to shift and lift and the evening breeze to feel again like a caress rather than like the first whiff of God's threatening presence.

I take that sense of a lightening of mood into my experience of James 5:16. This verse is part of a cluster of verses in which James speaks to Christians in a congregational setting of the power of their caring for each other, singing with each other, and above all praying for each other, because "the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."

In view here are several insights related to confession. One is just how routine James makes it. Confession is a natural part of the ordinary life of God's community, to be practiced as regularly as praying and singing. Also in view, as in the Nehemiah story, is

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how much confession can and probably often should be not the act of an individual or a few people but an exchange unfolding among all in the community. "Therefore confess your sins to one another...."

But James doesn't stop there. Through prayer those who have sinned will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins "so that you may be healed," he writes, and adds, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." Wrong behavior, as we have seen, has consequences, often terrible ones.

Confession, however, has consequences too: healing. We are to confess not only because God has smoked us out, not only to show, at

last, our readiness to see ourselves as we really are, but also to be healed. My mom made me pay it off, and it took much more time than it had taken to steal it, but I'll never forget how loved I felt after I confessed. To this day I feel the healing lightness of being I sailed on that day.

Recently, at a Maundy Thursday church meal, I saw what the healing that begins in and follows confession can feel like—especially if done routinely enough to enable some lightheartedness. We started telling stories of unacceptable things we had done. My story was of the night when, as a pastor in a rush to get

to a church meeting, I tailed somebody mercilessly through turn after turn. At the very last turn, the driver I was tailing went into the church parking lot. I was so ashamed I drove around the block. To this day I don't know whom, of those who called me to minister among them, I sinned against.

Another person told of stealing hot chocolate late one night from a church camp kitchen, getting caught by a stern camp director, and lying about what was underway. We heard about a member of another congregation who in a convenience store observed a woman impatiently waiting in a coffee line. She had on a WWJD ("What would Jesus do?") bracelet. The member, here nearly in the role of God smoking out the errant one, but with the mercy laughter always includes, leaned over and politely observed, "I think he'd have hot chocolate."

The storytelling went on and on. By the end of the meal we were laughing so hard we were crying. Amid the laughter there was healing. Why? Because as that group of committed Christians laughed at each other's foibles, we were also working implicitly on that age-old project of figuring out what is right and wrong and what must be done when we cross the line. Here the sins were smaller, so they only started us on a process that needs to go deeper for larger sins. But sometimes we learn from the small about the big. Even if in tiny ways, what we were doing was confessing to each other. And what made the laughter so deep was not only that the stories were funny but that we could feel in the act of telling them the healing lightness that comes when we not only flee our misbehaviors but together look at them and, by the very decision to tell them to each other, begin to say we know we should live differently from now on.

Confession is good for the soul, the old proverb says. So it is. We can thank God that Scripture, our own experience, and even the woes of the Catholic church teach us God has put the world together in such a way that often when we do wrong we are led, even if kicking and screaming, toward confession.

First God looks for us as the breeze blows and wrings out our confession that we were hiding for a reason. Then over time, as consequences pile up, we may find ourselves able at last to say, under our own steam and truly meaning it, that we have blown it. Next, if fortunate, we will find ourselves in a community of

people each aware enough of their own sin to treat confession, as James calls us to, as a natural part of life's ebb and flow. When that happens, we will find redemption and even, when most blessed, peals of healing laughter.

About the author

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