

On Roads of Faithfulness

a sermon based on Luke 3:1-8

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Week after week, we confess our sins together. We read the printed prayer in words from a worship book or written by the pastor—words that are, in one way or another, put into our mouths by someone else. I confess that often I will scan confessional prayers ahead of time and tally whether I’ve actually committed the particular sins mentioned or whether I’m saying the words on behalf of someone else that day. The reason we offer unison prayers of confession is, after all, because we’re all in this together. Before saying the unison prayer, we also confess our own personal sins in silence. I was shocked (and secretly a little pleased) when my church’s Thursday morning class suggested we *lengthen* the time of silent confession so that members would have time to consider their sins and ‘fess up more thoroughly!

Luke 3:1-8 reminds me of an article about confession I clipped from the *New York Times* magazine a while back. It was written by Lorenzo Albacate, a Roman Catholic priest, who recalls,

The first time I heard confession was a couple of weeks after my ordination in 1973, at St. Matthew’s Cathedral in Washington, DC, where John F. Kennedy’s requiem Mass was celebrated. The penitent was a tourist who had wandered in almost by accident. “I was on my way to a McDonald’s,” he said, “but I saw the church and remembered Kennedy’s funeral—then I noticed the little green light in the confessional, so I came in. I’m not really sure what I want.”

“Well,” I replied, “I hope you don’t want a Big Mac with fries” He chuckled, then said: “Look Father, it’s been a long, long time. I’m going to tell you things you have never heard in confession before.”

“That’s not too difficult,” I said. “This is my first confession. Anything you say will be a shock to me.” He started to laugh, hard. Those in line fled to the other confession line.

Albacate explains that he wasn’t taking confession lightly, but simply feeling the giddiness of “the infinite disproportion between himself and the mystery he was about to approach. Since then, he’s learned that many people still approach the confessional in fear—in fear of exposing the most embarrassing secrets—not only what they have actually done, but also what they have wanted to do. (Confessor: “Did you entertain impure thoughts?” Honest penitent: “No, Father, they entertained me.”)

In the Protestant tradition, we don’t have a priest to confess to; we take our sins directly to God, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200. We trust that we don’t need a human intercessor anymore, that Jesus is our “great high priest”—nevertheless, we will need to confess, to own up to our infractions, to count our sins in the way we’re told to count our blessings, to pause to consider all the things we’ve done that we shouldn’t have done, and all the things we’ve left undone on our moral and ethical to-do list.

But Fr. Albacate has come to understand that our need for confession is much more than that:

Since then I have come to know this: Confession is not therapy, nor is it moral accounting. At its best, it is the affirmation that the ultimate truth of our interior life is

our absolute poverty, our radical dependence, our unquenchable thirst, our desperate need to be loved. As St. Augustine knew so well, confession is ultimately about praise.

Fr. Albacate's first penitent wandered in almost by accident. Others of us approach more deliberately. We take a step, perhaps tentatively, perhaps boldly. We take a step toward God or meaning or a longing to be loved. We take one step, and confession leads us to another, until we find ourselves heading in a new direction altogether, turned around, which is what the Greek word for "repentance" literally means. Turning around—the kind of turning John the Baptist calls for when he tells us to turn away from selfishness, not once but all the time, till there aren't any people without a coat against the wind or food to fill their bellies. When he tells us to turn away from being like the well-to-do tax collectors, who had way more than they needed, till we close the gap between the rich and poor. When he tells us to turn from misappropriating our positions of power, as the soldiers did then, till we find cronyism and lies and little deals on the side unacceptable. John the Baptist isn't preaching some Marxist plot; he's preaching the good news of the gospel. As scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "Human values are reversed by God not for the destruction of the wicked but for the saving of the lost" . . . even—and maybe especially—those of us who didn't even know we had veered off the path that leads to God.

Where we got the idea that the road of faith should be sweetness and light, I will never know. If anything, it's the opposite: full of vinegar and darkness. John the Baptist is out there in the wilderness inviting us to join him there, where the paths meander, and the crooked roads take us far out of our way, and the rough places outnumber the smooth by miles. It's not that God has gone out of the way to create an obstacle course; it's just a fact that faith often takes us along rough roads, along challenging roads that lead us through uncomfortable places on our way.

What kind of roads do I mean? For me it brings to mind my family's travels in Europe some time ago, much of that trip spent in Switzerland. My daughter and I stayed for a week with my friend, a pastor in a "little village" outside Zurich. We then spent a few days farther south in her family's cabin in the Alps near where my friend grew up; and then we drove down through Italy to catch a ferry to Corsica. It was outrageous.

I have two distinct memories of roads there: first, a small aside, that every single highway and lane and Godforsaken path is marked by the obsessive-compulsive Swiss Germans. I was amused at first when we hiked up a small mountain near my friend's house in the village and a road sign marked a fork in the path in the woods—we were, after all, not far from the city. But when we drove up into the Alps and went walking in a Sound-of-Music meadow, high above the trees, by crystal-clear ponds that form the headwaters of some of the great rivers in Europe—when we saw a *street sign* there, I found it scary.

Which doesn't have much to do with anything. But it leads to my second memory of roads there. Driving up the mountain that day in the Alps, my friend boldly and quickly careened up the curving, one-lane roads as though she were on the straightaway at Indy. These were dirt roads—at best gravel in some places—and the edge (which I saw all too clearly from my window) slid straight down into deep crevices below. I was terrified. (At one point I screamed when an enormous hay truck came around the corner straight at us doing 40 miles per hour. My friend asked me not to scream anymore.)

The next day, we packed the car and headed out early to drive down through Italy. This time it was expressway driving—six lanes at the narrowest—going so fast that any hay truck going 40 miles per hour would have been run over in half a second. This time it was my friend who was terrified—her knuckles were honest-to-God white on the steering wheel—and I was dearly grateful when she finally accepted my offer to drive. Having grown up driving on Chicago expressways, Italy was nothing. Actually, it was

rather fun. (At one point my friend screamed when a car to the right of us passed out of nowhere and swerved in front. I didn't see what the big problem was. I asked her not to scream anymore.)

We laugh at ourselves now, but roads are sometimes dangerous places, with perils just as grave and real as in the arid wilderness of long ago, or along unmarked paths that lead us into places from which we find no way out. Sometimes we get so used to the roads that we don't even notice the dangers anymore—but not noticing doesn't make the dangers any less real.

Repentance, while it does mean turning around, doesn't always mean turning away on a different path. Sometimes, I believe, it means staying *on* the path, choosing, against all better sense not to veer off the road, not to grip the wheel too hard, not to overcompensate . . . even when somebody screams . . . even when we hear ourselves scream. It means choosing to follow the signs, especially when they appear in unexpected places. My friend Jerry, shortly after learning he had advanced cancer—like a huge hay truck careening toward him at a rapid rate down a narrow road—wrote that year,

Decades ago, I first came on W. H. Auden's *For the Time Being*, and it has salted my musings ever since. I am never quite sure I understand it, but for us life has been "rare beasts" and "unique adventures," truth and anxiety, passion and flesh, and a marriage that has permitted us to find our way to those things that you do once in life that last all your life.

*He is the Way,
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.
He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.
He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

Roads are often dangerous places. But traverse them we must, if we are to live . . . if we are to find love, or hope, or beauty . . . if we are to find our way to see God. Yet we do not have to find our way alone. In our household of faith, we are, all of us, surrounded by a great company of saints, a great cloud of witnesses, of prophets and martyrs, and of those who built street signs in the woods.

Many centuries ago, St. Augustine—who not only knew that confession is ultimately about praise, but also wrote the most eloquent prayers—wrote a particularly beautiful prayer confessing our deep need for company along the way:

God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, we beseech Thee; turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road to life, to Thy honor and glory.

Because, after all, we're all in this together. Amen.