



RECLAIMING RELIGIOUS
LANGUAGE SERIES
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CONFESSION

I want to start with the words from the play, *Doubt*. The main character in the play was a priest and here is part of his sermon. He is talking about the separations and the bonds people felt during the national tragedy of Kennedy's assassination in the '60s. The play took place in the '60s. And then he shifts and turns his attention to his congregation. And he says this.

"What about the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity? No one knows I'm sick. No one knows I've lost my last real friend. No one knows I've done something wrong. Imagine the isolation, now you see the world as through a window. On the one side of the glass, happy, untroubled people, and on the other side, you."

He goes on. "I want to tell you a story. A cargo ship one night sank. It caught fire and went down and only this one sailor survived. He found a lifeboat, rigged a sail. And being of nautical discipline, turned his eyes to the heavens and read the stars. He set a course for his home and exhausted, fell asleep. Clouds rolled in. And for the next 20 nights, he could no longer see the stars. He thought he was on course, but there was no way to be certain. And as the days rolled on and the sailor wasted away, he began to have doubts. Had he set his course right? Was he still going on towards his home? Or was he horribly lost and doomed to a terrible death? No way to know. The message of the constellations, had he imagined it because of his desperate circumstances or had he seen truth once and now had to hold onto it without further reassurance.

There are those of you in the church today, the priest said, who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe. And I want to say to you, doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone."

That was almost the entire sermon in this amazing play and subsequent film about the unpacking of the Catholic church in the 1960s with a priest at its center who is struggling with his faith and maybe hiding something. I won't spoil it for you. Once a play, then a film worth your while.

And the reason I turn to it today is because on the topic of confession, our reclaiming religious language, word of the day, I realized I knew very little about confession and went seeking in all ways for responses that could teach me.

I knew something only through Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and then, a little less high-minded, through Joe Walsh's 1985 tune of that name. And maybe then, also a little less high-minded, from a hilarious scene in *Seinfeld* when he enters a confessional booth. You can Google that.

I knew very little about confession, that is until this Lent. You see, having grown up a Unitarian, I never stepped foot into an actual confessional until a few weeks ago when I was on retreat with the Texas Unitarian Universalist ministers at a Catholic retreat center. I saw this sign, I took a picture for you, it says confessional on the beam. And I gravitated towards it and realized in the stained-glass next to it it said peace. And on the other side of that beam, it said patience.

Thinking to myself that I'm on retreat and I need a little peace and I need a little patience, I walked right into the confessional and closed the door behind me to see what would happen. "What could go wrong?" I said. Into this small space I went, it was actually a closet, not the kind of confessionals you see in the movies, the wooden cupboard, a small closet.

I flicked on the light and sat down and nothing happened. No priest arrived on the other side to receive my soulful confession, no questions or conversation. And no lightning strike I might add. Just me. Peaceful and patient, looking around at the bad Catholic artwork on the wall. And through the portal to the priest's side, I saw only an empty chair. And then I noticed on the door, there was a short prayer.

I copied it down for you. It said, "My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good." "So far so good," I thought, "I'm okay with this." I went on reading. It says, "I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things."

"Interesting," I thought. Have I sinned recently? Of course. Should I love God above all things? I mean, theologically I understand this, yes. So continue, Daniel, continue down the prayer. It said, "I firmly intend with your help to do penance." I thought, "Hmm, penance." Okay, what are we talking about now? "To sin no more," it says. I thought, "I doubt that will happen, but it sounds good in a confessional, so why not?" "And to avoid whatever leads me to sin." I thought, "Probably I can handle that if I put my mind to it." And then it said, "Our savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for our sins. In the name of God, have mercy." Not my theology really, but I'll take all the mercy I can.

And after I read that prayer, I sat a little longer in that little booth and then I went over to the priest's side. No one came in on the penitent's side, which saved me from receiving any confessions I really wasn't prepared to receive. But the priest also had a prayer on the wall. I didn't write that one down. It

said something about, you are forgiven, you are loved, go and do nine Hail Marys and such and such. After that, I left the confessional. As peace and patience descended on me, I left behind that little room.

I appreciated actually the time to ponder these things in this small closet. I noticed on the priest's side, the painting of an angel of fire set above me. He was the angel protecting the Garden of Eden. I appreciated the chance to open my soul to that moment.

The answer to the question, did I have anything to confess is of course I have sinned, if not in physical ways, in my heart. Who among us hasn't turned away from what we knew was right to do or think. I am human and so are you. And I know you would admit to your need to confession from time to time, not only because I know what it's like to live a human life, but also because I created a virtual confessional at the beginning of Lent. And I say this as your minister, that I have received over 50 heart-rending confessions in our virtual confessional.

I have read them all. I have meditated on them. I have held them sometimes for days and sometimes for weeks. I have understood what I could from them with little context of who confessed or why. And they have been deeply meaningful to me for one reason. That reason is that they are so honest and so raw and emotional and vulnerable. They are what I imagine to be like the prayers of a sailor lost at sea.

Some are pleas for help. Others are secrets held for a long time, if not a lifetime. They are doubts, sometimes doubts about whether you, the confessor, can change any of your mishaps. They are full narratives about how you feel the separation of your true self and the distance that you've created between the people around you. They are fantasies. And they are actions known to be wrong by you. And they are habits that bend, but do not break. They are admissions and they are apologies. They are all pleas for help. And they are honest. And in some ways, what I know about them is that they are keys to who we all are.

And I want to say to you that I am grateful for those of you who've had the courage to take this on, this overwhelming participation so far in this exercise I thought no one would use. And I want to say to those of you who submitted confessions that I hope it helped you even a little to share or to press a relief valve on your life for just a moment. And I thank you for trusting me to hold your most private matters.

And if you hear anything today about confession here, that you who confess are courageous for the facing the moments you face when you feel like you're a sailor alone in a sea that is greater than you, wondering if you will find home.

And whether you confessed or not in the virtual confessional, I hope that you will hear something today. Hear three things that I have learned over these past weeks. The first is that Unitarians need some kind of confessional. Not the kind that says here's your prescription, go do five prayers to the God of many names and sin no more. Not the kind that is hidden away in a dark, spooky box or closet. But Unitarians need the kind that encourages change and expresses hope for humanity, and if not

penance, then a next step to healing and wholeness. Next steps are what are missing in our virtual confessional.

I have learned these past weeks that the confession is not complete without some action on the confessor's part taken in response. The Catholics have this right, but they might not have the function correct. Everyone I asked who grew up Catholic going into those cubby holes, talking to priests about their sins, felt either compelled to come up with something and left the confessional having lied or worse. Or when they came out, received a thin prescription to do prayers and other penance that felt minimal compared to the misdeeds that they had walked in there with.

So I'm here to tell you that if you sent me a confession in these past weeks, that you have some responsibility to take action to correct those sins. Whether it is getting help from someone, telling the person you hurt or being truthful with your friends and family, you have some work to do. Whether it's confronting an addiction or self-deception or making amends or being true to yourself or whatever it is, you owe it to your life to take action when you know you did something wrong or are carrying something you have guilt about. Your side of the confessional is missing in our virtual confessional. Which so far I have not figured out how to remedy except to implore you now to take a next step of responsibility.

What comes next for our need for this thing we call confession is still a mystery to me. I don't believe we will have a box in the corner of the sanctuary, that I will be sitting there waiting for you to come. But I do know that we need a way to repair our lives, something holy and wholly meaningful. If you have ideas, I would love to hear them. I know those of you in recovery know something about public confession, but that isn't it either. We need a private yet effective functional confessional. Unitarians at large have never figured this out until maybe now. Maybe you can help me. That's the first thing.

The second thing I learned about confession is that I need to invite you to meet with me or to meet with a minister to unpack the confessions you sent. This is action. My former Catholic colleague tells me that during a confession in the dark with the priest, the priest would often say, "Look, I'm your priest, do you just want to sit down together and work this out?" This is what we call pastoral care. And I'm inviting you now to unpack and repack and design a journey to healing with us. We are your ministers and it is our life's calling to be present to your suffering.

So if you want someone to see you into wholeness, know that the invitation is open. That you might have to remember that we are your priests also. You might have to see us a little more like that. And to be honest, we might have to believe that too a little more. We promise that we will not give you easy answers or easy prescriptions to pray to the God of many names and sin no more. We will hear you into speech.

And the third lesson that I learned from being in the virtual confessional with you is that the mistakes we make don't define us unless we let them. You are not your worst mistake. I have held some of these mistakes with you for weeks, even though I do not know who or what. But I do know that the whole healthy and spiritual person gets him or herself right with self, other, and the holy. That our

work and the work of any faithful person is just this, to find a grounding within yourself that tunes your heart to care and trust. That finds a way to clear up relationships with others. And finds some way to lift the lens and feel the holy beyond us.

In this church, we don't ask for intercession, we don't need Jesus Christ to be the intermediary between ourselves and God. We need to spend time feeling what is holy and grounding. We need to find peace and patience. We need to come out of closets and clear out the clutter of our pasts with those who can hold them.

And that probably means you need to do that here in church or in your spiritual life. Read poetry, sit quietly in the mornings, write or spend time intentionally working on your spiritual life. It means that you might need to make time to ponder how the world feels to you in these moments and not just let it wash over you.

I call this a wholeness spiritual exercise, spending time considering your connections and your disconnections to others. This is a crucial step in healing your life, thinking and writing and pondering what relationships are broken and need repair in your life. Who in your life needs you to come clean? Who needs to hear the truth about who you are? Who needs to receive your repentant words? The common religious answer to these questions is God. But I would say to you that you owe it to yourself and to the others and to the holy in this perfect Unitarian trinity to find true healing and wholeness.

And it starts with asking yourself what grounds you? What matters? What does life offer you in terms of gifts that you did not work for? And then extends to those around you and asks you, where is the holy? Where is God in your life?

In our faith, there's no saving figure who magically is coming to take away your sins. There's just this, that we make mistakes because we are human. That we can forgive ourselves and each other. And that we must begin again in love because in our faith, we know that love is a sustaining power that holds us all. We know the first step is moving toward the truth of who we are.

Remember the reading by Wallace Robbins who said, "He who reaches out in need of help, whether it be for the sustenance of body or soul, whether it be for bare survival or for an enriched life is doing an act of prayer."

And so I ask you to do that act of prayer. Friends, I heard a lot of despair in these confessions that I've received so far this Lent. And I share that despair with you. The world is a difficult and chaotic place where we can get ourselves in all kinds of situations that feel impossible to untangle from. But I want you to know that life is good and it does matter. It matters that you are in our lives and the lives of the people around you. Life matters to the sailor trying to get home. And to those who walk into confessionals. And no doubt to all of us who can unseat this one true fact that no cloud can hide it, no storm can shape it from reality, that even with all our faults, the world is better with you in it. And especially with you when you mend the wounds in yourself and between you and others and between you and the holy I call God.

Peace and patience, friends. Peace and patience is ours to cultivate. And it also is an unbidden gift that soothes the hurting heart. Gifts of the spirit that are worth spiritual time.

I read your confessions each day in my office. I light a little Tibetan Buddhist incense. I sit quietly and read the confession over three times. Each one, I ponder what I might say to you. And each one I hold gently, and then I close the confessional with a prayer that soothes my soul as I have held the anguish and shared the depths of your heartfelt confession. It is a prayer that says, no matter what is going on in the world, that faith and love are worthy of our humanness. It is a prayer from Ted Loder who wrote the book, *Guerrillas of Grace*. That's guerrillas like the revolutionaries, not the apes.

In this prayer that I close the confessional with every day, I close today's sermon. And I invite you to ponder holding yourself gently here in this sanctuary. And holding those immediately around you who have secrets they do not speak or pain they do not share. Consider those just next to you who might be struggling or in need of faith or have doubts and need love or holding something close to themselves that no one else knows. And consider yourself and those in your life who need healing and the healing balm of love because we all do.

Let us join together in Ted Loader's prayer to close the confessional. Lord, of wondrous patience, the Earth has risen again, emerging from a darkness in a way it has never quite been before. A fresh time, an unused space alive with trembling possibility, and I am with it, such staggering grace. Please nurture me in newness, set me free of the tyrannies of habit and complaining and blaming. Shake from me the dusty melancholy of too much success and comfort, pride and pretense. And as I, on the first day of creation, I may begin to see the miracle of life and humanity, to hear the hum of grace, unfolding to meet all my needs, unexpectedly and surprisingly. And urging me to go on in faith to whatever is next in love. Amen.