

“On Roads of Faithfulness”
Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8
December 4, 2005

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First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois
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Week after week, we repent our sins together. We dutifully read our printed prayer of confession together, in words from the old worship book or new words written by the pastor, whether or not we think they apply to us this day. I confess that I scan the prayer ahead of time, tallying whether I’ve actually committed these particular sins or whether I’m saying it on behalf of someone else that day – because we’re all in this together. After the unison prayer, we also have a time to repent of our own personal sins in silence. Penitence -- confession -- is, in the end, both personal and common, individual and shared.

Our gospel lesson today is about confession -- about repentance that leads back to God. It reminds me of an article about confession I’d clipped from the New York Times magazine (dated May 7, 2000; God help the person who cleans out my personal affects one day; they will drown in clippings). It was written by Lorenzo Albacate, who taught theology at a Catholic seminary in Yonkers. Fr. Albacate writes:

“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.

“I wasn’t taking the occasion lightly. The mystical tradition speaks of something called giddiness before the sacred, a way of expressing the infinite disproportion between you and the mystery with which, somehow, you have become involved. I was simply feeling the infinite disproportion of it all.

“Many think of confession as a frightening exposure of the ...self, ... uncovering the most embarrassing secrets – not only what you have actually done, but also what you have wanted to do. (Confessor: ‘Did you entertain impure thoughts?’ Honest penitent: ‘No, Father, they entertained me.’)”

In our 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 still 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, 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.”

Confession is ultimately about praise, because confession leads us back to our truest home, back to the everlasting arms of God. It rarely happens all at once; more often, we take one step towards God or meaning or a longing to be loved ... we take one step, and it leads to another, until we find ourselves heading in a new direction altogether, turned around, which is what the Greek word for “repentance” literally means. *Metanoia*, turning around. The kind of turning John the Baptist calls for, when he tells us to “receive the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” when he welcomes people from the whole Judean countryside and all the sophisticated people of Jerusalem, who may not even be sure what they need to turn from, but find themselves propelled into the harsh wilderness, looking for something, even in the last place you’d think you’d find comfort and hope.

Where we got the idea that the road of faith should always lead to places of sweetness and light, I will never know. If anything, it’s the opposite, down alleyways 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 hills are daunting, 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 goes out of the way to create an obstacle course; it’s just a fact that, rather than protect us, faith often takes us along rough roads, along challenging roads that make us uncomfortable and sometimes even frightened.

What kind of roads do I mean? For me it brings to mind my family’s travels in Europe a few years ago. We stayed for a week with my friend Denise, a pastor in a “little willage” outside of Zurich. We then spent a few days farther south in their cabin in the Swiss Alps where Denise 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 god-forsaken path is marked by the obsessive-compulsive Swiss Germans. I was amused when we hiked up a small mountain near their 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 head-waters 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 leads to my second memory of roads there. Driving up the mountain that day in the Alps, Denise boldly careened up the curving, one-lane roads as if she were on the straight-away at Indy. These were gravel roads, 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 mph. Denise asked me not to scream anymore.)

The next day we packed up and headed out early to drive down the autostrasse through Italy, where any hay truck going 40 would be run over in a second. This time, Denise was terrified --

her knuckles were honest-to-God white on the steering wheel – and I was dearly grateful when she accepted my offer to drive. Having learned to drive in Chicago on the Kennedy, Italy was nothing. Actually, it was rather fun. (At one point she screamed when a car came out of nowhere on the right and swerved in front of us. I didn't see what the problem was. I asked her not to scream anymore.)

We laugh at ourselves now, but roads are sometimes terrifying places, and the roads of life are surely no different. We find ourselves on a familiar path and suddenly around the corner an illness comes barreling down on us, or the terrible loss of someone we love. We're happily racing along and suddenly we're cut off by a board that no longer values our work, or a spouse who no longer cares to be married. Or our own doubts and self-defeating behaviors drive us off the road and we find ourselves crashed in a ditch of our own making. But it is in those times, when we're not in control, that we are likeliest to repent, to turn around ... that we are most likely to accept, as Fr. Albacate put it, the "ultimate truth" of our "absolute [reliance], our radical dependence, our desperate need" for God.

Friends of ours – Jerry and Florence Forshay – both retired now, he from ministry, and she from heading the agency my husband now directs – these friends of ours wrote a Christmas letter one year that spoke quite eloquently of disturbing roads that lead to repentance and faith. Speaking of their travels that summer Jerry wrote:

"Headed south on Hwy 33 toward Wounded Knee, in the distance as we entered the Badlands, a house seemed planted in the middle of the highway. Thinking it a mirage, that the highway turned off at some lower elevation, I dismissed it. But as we moved forward, the house continued to grow larger. I realized that the house was moving toward us, that there was no place to pull off. When we got near it, I saw a truck pulling it, but still it seemed to take up the whole highway. With fear and trembling, we passed by where there seemed no way.

"It seems that way this year. Here is this war taking up the whole highway, bearing down on us, with no way to stop it. A hundred thousand troops here, a [multi-] billion appropriation there, weekly reports of dangerous plots against our nation, and it comes at us like a house taking up the road. We're not sure who or what to trust and obey.

"Another house is moving at me. I have cancer – thyroid, probably bone, and kidney. I don't feel all that bad, but it keeps coming after me like that house, only this time the space is very narrow. ..."

Faithfulness doesn't always mean turning around – turning away on a different path. Sometimes 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 confess not just our sin but our neediness, our abject dependence on the God who came to us in flesh and blood to walk our path with us. It means choosing to follow the signs, especially when they appear in unexpected places. Jerry and Florence's letter concludes this way:

"Simone Martini's "The Annunciation" has long been a favorite of mine. Standing looking at it in the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, I felt again the story that starts with the annunciation of Mary's pregnancy and culminates in the flight to Egypt to escape Herod's murderers. Good is always at risk. The angel tells Mary she is pregnant, and she shrinks back in horror, but her head

nods forward to accept. That is always the task of faith, whether there is a house bearing down on you or not. ...

“Decades ago, I first came on W.H. Auden’s *For the Time Being*, and it has salted my musings ever since. ... 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 adventure, or joy. And the promise is this: week after week, day after day, as we turn to the paths of faithfulness, even – maybe especially – when we’re least in control, we will find our way home, to the arms of God, who has expected our return for years.

And finally, John the Baptist’s prophecy so long ago, reminds us that we do not find our way alone. Jerry and Florence are blessed to have found their way together. But in our household of faith, we are, all of us, surrounded by a company of saints, so great a cloud of witnesses, of prophets, and the crowds who go out to the desert to meet him, and the friends we do not even know, who left us street signs in the woods.

Many centuries ago, St. Augustine -- who not only knew that confession is ultimately about praise, but also found his own way through temptation and sin, and no small adventures – many centuries ago, St. Augustine wrote a particularly beautiful prayer; let it be our prayer for our way, wherever we are along the path of faith. Let me close with his words; let us pray:

“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” (Cited by Martin Marty in *Context*, June 15, 1997).

Amen.