Book 4

Sunday August 4, 1974

"TRUE CONFESSIONS" I John 1:5-10, James 5:13-16

Have you ever wondered what it must be like to be a Roman Catholic priest hearing "confessions" hour after hour, week after week, sitting in a small stall with a partition between him and the person confessing?

Recently one priest I know described the experience by saying, "It's like being stoned to death with popcorn." He went on to say, "Most of the confessions I hear are so utterly trivial, so downright silly, that they bore me to death."

A Roman Catholic writer confirmed what the priest said. She was convent educated and the kind of sins she and her schoolmates confessed were often minor. One of them had taken communion, which by the rules of the church had to be taken after fasting, after accidentally swallowing a drop of water brushing her teeth.

Well, well, we say. At least we Protestants do not have that kind of problem, and yet I'm not so sure. Anyone who does a lot of counseling knows that the weary part is is often waiting for the real sins to be confessed.

Furthermore, most of us know in our lives that it is often difficult for us to acknowledge the subtle and hidden sins. And worse still, they are not even being felt as sins. Such things as unacknowledged prejudice or the manipulation of other human beings, or our greed, or our neglect of the poor and the starving and those in prison.

In his best-selling book, "Whatever Became of Sin," Dr. Karl Menninger, has a chapter entitled, "Sin as Collective Irresponsibility," and in the chapter lists such sins as our continued rape of the environment, our unwillingness to regulate and control the sale of handguns and more.

We have been so used to taking only a narrow personal definition of sin, that we have as Jesus put it, neglected the weightier matters of justice. This is not to say that there are no personal sins; there are many which are also serious. But any true confession needs to see sin also in its large categories as well as the small.

All ministers have had the experience of having a person apologize for swearing in their presence. It's a kind of confession of a personal sin. Yet I often think that if that's the worst sin that person has committed, he or she is quite good.

I remember one particular instance of a person apologizing for swearing in my presence. He had suddenly let slip a familiar four letter word. Yet after that throughout the whole evening, the rest of the perfectly clean-mouthed conversation had been foul and ugly. He showed his hatred of certain persons, his lack of respect, his deeply held prejudice. He was vile with bitter contempt for half the human race. Yet he had no idea that that was wrong! He didn't apologize for that at all. He simply felt that in the presence of a clergyman to use a bad word was his only fault.

We so often get things mixed up. A southern preacher recalled recently that in the little church where he was brought up, it was considered a sin to wear a tie, but it was all right to attend a lynching..

II. Confession and forgiveness are necessary for all of us. The older I get, the more I realize the value of both. I have seen so many people crippled by the refusal both to acknowledge their sins and the refusal to forgive others.

After all, true confession means being willing to be open toward other people and to disclose yourself. True confession is a kind of unloading of the burdens we bear. I remember a person saying to me some years ago, "Look, I have never told this to anyone, but I've been unhappy most of my life in my present job and my marriage is not what it should be." After that confession and some more conversation, the person began to feel better and to have a more healthy outlook for the first time in his life.

Haven't we all felt at one time or another that we would like the opportunity to sit down with someone who cared and be able to say to them openly--this is the kind of person I am. This is what I believe. These are my secret worries and my secret sins. This is the real me! That would be true confession.

Now of course that's a kind of scary business. I venture to say that there is probably no experience more terrifying

than that of self-disclosure to a person or persons who mean something to us. There are people who would rather die than become known as they truly are.

Yet in the effort to avoid confession, to avoid facing what we are, to avoid becoming known, we often provide for ourselves a kind of cancerous stress which saps our energy and is not healthy. Thus Jesus would often say to a person he was healing, "Your sins are forgiven!" He knew that it was as important for the person to be cleansed, to have the load of his sin lifted from him as it was for him to gain physical health.

So much of our time and energy is spent pretending, covering up, protecting our images, guarding ourselves, afraid of being found out, of being known as we really are deep down.

But when we admit and confess our sin, our weaknesses, our errors, our meanness, our fears and our doubts, we divest ourselves of them. We unload them. We are forgiven and we gain new strength.

In the letter of James in the New Testament, we are told therefore as Christians to confess our sins to one another. In our Protestant tradition, we are all priests one to another. And in our confessions, the break-through to new relationships takes place.

The problem with sin is that it demands to have a person all by himself. It withdraws a person from productive and meaningful healthy relationships with others. Then the more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, and the more disastrous is the isolation. He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone.

Sin wants to remain unknown, secret. It shuns the light! In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person or a society. This can happen anywhere, in a person's individual life or in the life of a nation. A large part of the problem with the whole Watergate affair, is that too many attempts were made by keep it hidden even after it began to be uncovered. This added poison to our whole system. There were very few true confessions on the part of anyone.

About a year ago, the title of the sermon was "You are Your Secrets," and it dealt with a similar theme. That which we keep secret, keep hidden within ourselves is what we become and what we are. If we keep the bad things hidden and covered up, our sins, our fears, our doubts, then we become that and most of our energy is wasted. But if we reverse the process and do good deeds, do them secretly and keep them secret and at the same time confess our wrongdoing, unload it, then we will become a good person from within.

There's common sense to all of this. We can bear our good deeds alone--to keep them secret will cause us no problem and will not sap our energy. But we all know how heavy a burden it is to carry our failures, our weaknesses, our fears all alone. We need others to help us.

There is overwhelming evidence to show that the break-through to healing, to becoming a new person, a forgiven person, to being released, being free, comes from true confession--not the confession of just the trivial sins, but of what we are deep down.

Part of the success of any counseling situation is that the person seeking help is able to tell the secrets that have been so long poisoning his or her life. Time and time again, I have listened to persons telling me things that have long been kept locked in and yet things that that person wanted to get rid of for years and years.

There are all sorts of people who on the outside appear secure and unafraid, but who deep down want to say -- "If you only knew how tormented how I am."

A few years ago on a sunny day in September, a stern-faced, plainly dressed man could be standing still on a street-corner in the busy Chicago Loop. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he would solemnly lift his right arm and pointing to the person nearest him, intone loudly the single word, "GUILTY!" Then without a change of expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture, Then again, the inexorable raising of his arm, the pointing and the solemn pronouncing of the one word, "GUILTY!"

The effect of this strange activity on the passing people was extraordinary, almost eerie. They would stare at him,

hesitate, lookaway, look at each other, and then at him again; then hurriedly continue on their ways. One man turning to another exclaimed, "But how did he know?" No doubt many others had similar thoughts. How did he know, indeed?

We can imagine some of the people thinking to themselves -- "Did anyone see?" "I wasn't myself when I did it. I wouldn't want the children to see me. How can I ever straighten it out?"

We all are guilty. We are all sinners. As our text reminds us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But then comes also the good news. "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive -our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

As Christians when we confess to one another and in so doing to God, we do so in the confidence that the one to whom we confess understands, because he or she also knows his own sin. When a person comes to us to tell us about his or her failures, we know that here is a person like ourselves, who yearns for forgiveness.

We all need persons with whom we can be open and honest, who will accept us with all of our weaknesses, fears and failures; persons in whose presence we do not have to be protective and closed for fear they will dislike us or cut us off.

A large part of what the Christian community is to be is just that; a community where true confessions can occur and we can experience forgiveness.