

## When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place

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It may be the most poignant and personal relationship in the entire New Testament. Peter and Jesus have a very complex, human, and dramatic relationship. In some scenes Peter is the smartest, most spiritually sensitive disciple who seems to “get it” before the others do. At one point Jesus says, “Upon this rock, I will build my church.” That is a word play from the Greek word for rock, *petra*, is close to “Peter.” Many Christians, particularly Catholics, cite this proclamation as the passing of the mantle of authority from Jesus to Peter to the popes that follow as Peter’s successors.

However, it is not so simple as to assume that Peter was the teacher’s pet all of the time. There are times when Peter makes mistakes, and Jesus corrects him. At times Peter is Jesus’ foil – a character who is the opposite of the lead that allows Jesus to shine as the hero and demonstrate the latter’s wisdom. Sadly for our friend Peter, the week leading up to Easter is full of these moments when he just can’t seem to get anything right.

Luke tells us that Jesus and his disciples rent a room so that they can have the Passover meal together. While they are eating, an argument breaks out over who loves Jesus the most. Which one of them will be the most honored in heaven when they get there? It shows how juvenile and ego-driven the disciples could be, even this late in their time with Jesus. I am sure Peter felt assured that he was the best. He was the man. Peter was the favorite. Jesus scolds his disciples reminding them that the last shall be first, and in order to enter the Kingdom you must be willing to serve and be the least of these – the opposite of being ego-driven.

This makes it all the more amazing that only a few hours after that meal, Peter would deny his own teacher and friend. As we heard from the story this morning, Peter's denial of Jesus three times was perhaps the lowest moment of his life thus far. Peter was ashamed and humiliated, because he knew that Jesus knew what he had done. There was no denying it or hiding from it. All it took was that knowing glance from Jesus, and Peter's humiliation was complete.

We can imagine that this was rock bottom for Peter. That story he had been telling himself – the narrative where he was Jesus' best and brightest disciple – is shattered. He sees it as the illusion it was. That relationship has been broken, and Peter

longs to have it repaired. He longs for some new vision of how to live. What he needs is to make amends; to borrow again from the twelve-step program. In order to clear the decks and pave the way for that new being to arise in his life, Peter needs confession.

Confession is the theme for the month of April. It is an odd topic for Unitarian Universalists perhaps. We don't really have anything that matches up to the Catholic sacrament of confession. And yet that is precisely why it is an interesting topic to explore: what might confession mean in a UU context? While it is most closely associated with Catholicism and monasticism, confession is a spiritual practice that can be found in various traditions. The early Methodists, such as John and Charles Wesley who wrote that rousing hymn we start every Easter morning with, made confession part of their regular meetings. Buddhist monks regularly confess when they have broken the monastic rules to their fellow monks in a monthly ceremony. Confession is an important spiritual practice that helps to lead us from despair and guilt toward forgiveness and love. When we find ourselves in an emotional and spiritual low point, as Peter was in, confession can be a practice that leads us back to the light.

There are five stages of confession, five aspects of it in order for confession to take effect. The first is the most basic and at the same time the most difficult: to acknowledge when you have done

something wrong. There can be no confession if you don't understand that you have failed at something or simply that you messed up. In some cases, I guess we might go so far as to assert that a "sin" was committed, but confession doesn't always need to be so dramatic. However confession cannot move forward unless there is some basic understanding that you have done something wrong.

The second stage of confession follows from this acknowledgement of wrong doing. The second stage is wanting to make it better. Whereas stage one is intellectual, stage two is an emotional reaction. Stage two has urgency around it. I know I did something wrong and now that I know that, I want to make it better.

Stage one and stage two are individual. Knowing you have done something wrong, and wanting to fix it, are personal experiences. At stage three, confession becomes social or interactive. The third stage of confession is actually speaking that wrong doing to another person. Saying it out loud is an important part of the road to making things better. It is not merely a personal wish, but it is now a commitment once we have spoken those words to a confessor. Obviously this is a sensitive stage, and that is why there are so many rules in the Catholic church around how and when a confession can be heard. In the secular

world there is even a website, called [confession.net](http://confession.net), where people anonymously post their confessions. I mention this website in your spiritual homework insert, if you want to explore it for yourself.

Part of the confession must be to ask for forgiveness. It is the verbal equivalent of doing a prostration. Asking for forgiveness makes you vulnerable, and as a result expresses authenticity and sincerity to heal whatever has been broken. Submission of the ego and the will to another person is not popular in our secular age, yet it is the cornerstone of the religious life. Forgiveness is a new state of reconciliation. It is the beginning of the rift being repaired. Asking for forgiveness is the fourth stage of confession.

The fifth and final stage of confession is when forgiveness has been granted. At this final stage, the reset button is hit, and we begin again in love. It is at this final stage of confession that our heart is once again in a holy place, as we sing every week in our liturgy. No, the wrong doing is not glossed over or glibly forgotten as if it never really mattered. Confession should never trivialize our mistakes and transgressions. Confession is, however, a path forward through them.

Obviously confession is not easy to do. I think we as Unitarian Universalists let ourselves off the hook too easily without some notion or practice of confession. Without a spiritual practice of confession, then it is all that much harder to forgive each other. It takes a lot of spiritual maturity and courage to authentically engage in confession and not simply go through the motions. Maybe courage and spiritual maturity are precisely the virtues we are meant to cultivate by deeply engaging in a practice of confessing our wrong doing and failures.

It is in this spirit that I have a few things that I need to confess to you. Over the course of the last couple of months I have heard a number of rumblings, complaints, and general expressions of concern. The specific content of these complaints range from particular issues or decisions that have been made to broad sweeping anxiety about the future of the church and where it is headed. The spirit of what has made its way back to me, has been dissatisfaction with me and the job that I am doing as your Senior Minister.

Clearly in the eyes of some, I have failed to live up to your expectations of me. I have preached sermons that have touched the mind, but perhaps not the heart. I could have been bolder and clearer in my vision for First Unitarian Church and how we might work together to achieve that vision. I should have been

more proactive in building and maintaining relationships in order to build trust and a deeper pastoral connection with you. I could have done better in these areas; I should have. And I resolve to get better at meeting those expectations that you have expressed. To those of you for whom my ministry has fallen short of your expectations, I ask for your forgiveness.

For the past few weeks the Board and I have been in communication with each other, with District staff, and with my colleagues, around what we have heard from you. Together, we have agreed to a six month assessment period where we will examine the most urgent issues before us and my work to address them. It is my intention to work diligently over that period to demonstrate my willingness to serve and to adapt my ministry to the changing needs of the congregation as we move forward into the uncharted territory of our future. (pause)

You know the Gospel of John tells us about another little anecdote that took place after the events of Easter. Peter and two of the other disciples were fishing on a lake. They see someone walking along the shore, and while they cannot clearly see who it is, they intuitively know that it is risen Jesus. Peter is so excited that he jumps out of the boat and swims to him. Eventually the others haul in their catch and join them for a meal of bread and grilled fish.

Jesus goes up to Peter, and asks him a question: “Do you love me?” Peter is taken aback, and responds with, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” A little time goes by, the conversation wanders into other areas perhaps, but Jesus again looks at Peter and asks him, “Do you love me?” Again, Peter gives the same response, “Yes Lord, you know I love you.” Then before departing Jesus asks Peter for a third time, “Do you love me?” Peter, probably beside himself with frustration, says, “Yes Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.”

Three times Peter denied Jesus. After coming back from the dead, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. This is not a coincidence. For a moment at least, if we take the text at face value and assume that these are two men who had a close friendship with each other, then Peter’s denials were a rift in that relationship. By proclaiming his love of Jesus three times, Peter repairs the breach between them. This may be the first example of confession in the Bible. Finally at last, Peter’s heart is in a holy place once again.

Jesus’ question creates a framework or context for putting our heart in a holy place. That is the fifth stage of confession: to begin again in love. I hope and pray that over this next stage of our relationship together as minister and congregation that we can move toward that outcome – to begin again in love. When

our heart is in a holy place, then we are able to move forward in love. When we have the courage to confess our shortcomings to each other, ask for forgiveness, and actually receive forgiveness – that experience, oh my, that is a brand new day. As I said to our children earlier, Easter is about finding something new where you didn't expect it. That is an every day, every moment reality for us, but we usually don't realize that. But the fruits of confession are a new beginning. The fruits of confession are living with your heart in a holy place. The fruits of confession come from daring to be vulnerable and trusting in the compassion of those you love to hold you up when you need to be held up. That is where I am today; dreaming of that moment.

Confession allows us to lay down the burdens we carry. We need not account for every small little sin or transgression we have ever made in our life. But if we don't at least acknowledge them, the first stage, then they accumulate on our soul like barnacles on the side of a boat. Confession is the process of scraping them off so that we can glide easily through the waters of our life. When we confess and are forgiven then there is a lightness to us. A fresh start like the freshness of life in spring time – it is an Easter feeling if ever there was an Easter feeling. The more hidden our failures and our complaints are, the more they descend into the shadows of dysfunction and pain.

Confession brings these into the light as a sort of antiseptic for the soul. There is no feeling like laying that burden down. You feel like dancing. You feel like shouting. Life is sweeter, when love is shining all around me. Amen Blessed Be. Please rise as you are able and join in hymn #201 Glory, Glory Hallelujah!