

## Confess Your Sins to One Another

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

**Sermon Series: One Anothering**

James 5:13-16

*Americans are becoming increasingly disconnected from each other.*

Robert Putnam, professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, wrote about the decline in American community life. As the title of his book *Bowling Alone* indicates, the percentage of people who belong to a bowling league is a fourth of what it was in the 1960s. Putnam is not so much interested in the popularity of bowling as he is in how this single trend demonstrates the seismic shift taking place in American life today. Americans aren't joining or volunteering as much anymore. We aren't voting or joining political parties. We're not participating in Boy Scouts or card clubs, the Rotary or the PTA.

Putnam coins the phrase "social capital" to refer to the network of community connections society depends upon for survival. These connections, typically arranged through clubs or organizations, function as social glue and play a critical role in our ability to function as a collective culture. According to Putnam, such social structures are disintegrating. Our collective well-being is being undermined by this quest for autonomy and individualism. Americans are becoming increasingly disconnected from each other.

Technology has contributed to the erosion of societal well-being. Putnam writes how the under-25

crowd is much more willing to share the intimate details of their lives through instant or text messaging than they are to speak to one another in person. He describes how two roommates in a college dorm regularly instant message each other, even though they share the same room.

Home builders report porches are back in style, yet I'm not sure why. I never see people using them. The garage door goes up, the car goes in and the door goes back down. After our long commutes, we retreat to the seclusion of our home entertainment systems. Sociologists have a name for this behavior; they call it cocooning.

Why am I telling you all this? This same phenomenon of isolationism threatens the church. We talk about faith, in church circles, as something private and personal. Don't get me wrong: there must be a personal element to our relationship with God. But God also intends faith to be mutual and public. Read the Bible and what do we find? We find people praying and working together. Jesus established the church as a place where people could worship and serve God together.

I've been thinking recently how my preaching has changed in 26 years of serving this church. Some changes are rather obvious, such as no longer preaching behind a pulpit

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and speaking from a manuscript. Now, please, there is no inherent virtue in preaching without notes. If you want to know a secret, my outline on the communion table helps me remember transition points in my message.

I began to preach without notes somewhat by accident. I left my manuscript at home one Sunday morning. I could have raced home to retrieve it and made it back in time. I decided I knew it well enough to preach without it. I discovered a whole new world out in front of the pulpit. I am much more cognizant of whether people are tracking with the sermon or tuning out. I can more easily detect whether people are here out of a sense of joy or duty. I can observe you checking your watch or seeing what's going on outside. Sometimes, I can witness when the Holy Spirit grabs hold of someone to speak God's Word to him or her.

At a deeper level, my preaching has become more Biblical. I am less inclined to wax eloquent about my own opinions and more eager to plumb the richness of God's Word. I identify with something the 20th century theologian Karl Barth said about how his preaching changed through the years: "In my preaching I have gradually become attentive to the Bible."

My preaching has also become more communal. When I first came to this church, I thought I could pretty much make it on my own. Forget I ever thought that! I now recognize how much we need

each other for encouragement and support. Conducting funerals on a regular basis brings me back to life's fragility. I am convinced there are some things God reveals to people only in community.

We are currently engaged in a sermon series on the "one another" passages of the New Testament. On New Year's Day, we began with Jesus' admonition to love one another. Last Sunday, we examined Paul's directive to forgive one another. Today, we turn our attention to the words from James to confess our sins to one another.

Before we participate in mutual confession, we had better understand something of what we mean by sin. According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Sin is any word, thought or deed that transgresses God's holy law." Sin is any deed which breaks or ignores God's law. Sin is any word of unkindness, slander or gossip. Sin is any malicious or impure thought. What would your reaction be if we posted every thought you ever entertained on the walls of this sanctuary? You would flee to the North Pole!

John writes in his epistle, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we refuse to acknowledge our sins we make God out to be a liar" (1:8-10).

John opens this section of his letter by utilizing the metaphor of light: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1:5). I find

***“Confess our sins to one another and pray for one another so that we might be healed.”***

– (James 5:16)

myself both simultaneously drawn to God’s light and repelled by it. There is something within all of us that resists God’s light, since light exposes the dark places in our lives. God brings to light our secret sins; our anger, pride, gossip, greed and lust. Since we don’t want our secret sins brought to the surface, we are tempted to keep our distance from God.

Our Scripture lesson in James directs us to pray for one another in every situation of life. We pray for people who are cheerful, suffering or sick. James then directs us to “Confess our sins to one another and pray for one another so that we might be healed” (5:16).

The Catholic Church references this verse as justification for the sacrament of confession, which is routinely offered by a priest in a confessional. Protestants counter that no human mediator is necessary, since Jesus serves as our high priest. We can go directly to Christ to make our confession and receive absolution. Yet, sometimes we need human intermediaries to intercede on God’s behalf. If you are carrying around some secret sin no one else knows about and are unable to shake it, perhaps you ought to make your confession to someone in this church to receive the pardon you are seeking.

You may be wondering, why would I want to confess my sins to someone? Two reasons come to mind. First, mutual confession makes our sins more real. We take

responsibility for our sins when we acknowledge them to other people.

Sin works best in secret. Sin thrives under the cover of darkness. Maybe that explains why temptation comes to us in all of its fury when the sun goes down.

During the Great Awakening of the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards was presiding over an enormous prayer meeting. Eight hundred men were assembled that day to pray for spiritual renewal. A woman whose husband was attending the meeting sent a message to Edwards asking him to pray for her husband. The note described her husband as a man who had become unloving, prideful and difficult.

Edwards read the message in private and, thinking the man in question was present, proceeded to read the note to the 800 men. Edwards asked if the man who had been described would raise his hand, so the whole assembly could pray for him. Three hundred men raised their hands. Would that we would have that kind of candor and humility in the church! “Confess your sins to one another and pray for each other, so that you may be healed.”

Second, we confess our sins to one another because mutual confession reminds us that we are not alone. When we confess our sins to one another, we come to find out we all struggle to live faithfully before God. Confession doesn’t require us to be elaborate about our dark side. What the woman wrote about being unloving, prideful and difficult should suffice!

***If we're all sinners, what's the big deal about admitting that we, in fact, sin?***

If I could recruit someone to give a Minute for Witness every Sunday, I would gladly do so. Personal testimonies remind us God is working in our church, helping us to overcome temptation and adversity. We desire to become a loving, mutually supportive people, not a society of do-gooders or holy rollers. We take our confession of sin seriously. If we're all sinners, what's the big deal about admitting that we, in fact, sin?

I know this congregation intimately, so I am well acquainted with things that may not be readily apparent to you. Once you get past how well dressed, educated, sophisticated and affluent we are, we discover ourselves to be people struggling with the same besetting sins and temptations everyone else confronts.

Do you have a close Christian friend or two who can walk with you and support you in faith? Invite this person or two into your life. "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

If you don't have any spiritual friends, make it a matter of prayer and discernment to find one in this church. Don't waste all your time talking about the Redskins or your next vacation, find people who can reciprocate your spiritual concerns. What people want most in a church is not people busy with church work; they want to find authentically spiritual people, willing to confess their sins and

pray for one another. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst" (Matthew 18:20). As I said, some things Jesus reveals only in community.

