

## Confession and Atonement

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
and Worship Associate Frances Myers  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento  
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### Rev. Roger's Homily Part 1 of 2

As part of our theme-based ministry program entitled Soul Matters, our theme in this month of September is Renewal. And tonight's topic is the renewal that can come from the act of confession and clearing the air. In this day and age, when people hear the word confession, one of two images might come to mind. We might think of scenes from a television show with detectives and lawyers trying to get to the bottom of a crime. Perhaps in a dramatic final scene, somebody fesses up--and we're all surprised. The other image is that of a parish priest. He's seated in a cabinet called a confessional. There's a little screen covered by a little door between him and the parishioner only inches away from him. The other person admits their sins and asks for pardon by the priest on behalf of God. This ritual has been impeded in the past few months by the pandemic's necessary restrictions on meetings between people, especially meetings in close, indoor spaces. As you can see on the next slide, this has led to some creative alternatives on the part of some priests. I've seen more than one picture of a drive-by confessional, like the one on the next slide. I can imagine that after this pandemic a lot of people would prefer to stay in their cars for confession and keep their distance from the priest. *Thank you for the slide.*

I'm always captivated by a scene in a movie when a character takes a confessional seat across from a priest, who slides open the door. "Forgive me Father, for I have sinned," the other person starts out. A scene like that usually conveys crucial information about the movie's plot, or about the characters. Of course, it reminds us of something about ourselves as well. We all do things we should

not have done. Sometimes we fail to do what we should have done. We hold regrets. These regrets often become burdens, weighing down our spirits. It can be good to acknowledge them, to apologize, to ask to be forgiven, to clear the air.

I have unburdened myself in this way with trusted friends, ministers, and a therapist or two—or thee. Back in my 20s, my first therapist was a former clergyperson, so I got a 2-for-1 deal on unburdening myself. And over the years of working with people as a minister, I've learned how much I'm not alone in the need to get something off my chest, and not alone in how renewing it can feel. This is one reason Rev. Lucy and I are here—as a confidential listening presence to hear what you need to say, to receive it with as much care as you offer it. It is my belief that after we say what we need to say—as hard as it is to get around to it—after we say what we need to say we feel relief. The burden that we felt seems a lot lighter or smaller than before.

In the calendar of the Jewish tradition, this week is called the Days of Awe. These are the ten days between the new year's day of Rosh Hashanah and the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. The observance of these days in Jewish practice involves reflection on human mortality, sin, and repentance. In his book *Essential Judaism*, George Robinson writes that after the Rosh Hashana new year service, "many Jews will go to a nearby body of flowing water. [In a ritual called *Tashlikh*], they will take from their pockets bread crumbs symbolizing their sins of the previous year and cast the crumbs into the water," as they recite the scriptural poetry of the psalms. This ritual of casting symbols of our sins into a stream dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> According to Robinson, the Hebrew term for *sin* is a term from the sport of "archery, and [it] means a shot that falls short of the mark, [falls short of the target]. Hence, [he says,] those sins that we repent at this time of year are a failure to live up to our potential, a failure to fulfill one's obligations.

In the Catholic faith, confession is known formally as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Clearing the air is a way of reconciling—to yourself and your spirit as much as to the Larger Life that holds all of us. In the original usage of the term *reconcile* or *reconciliation*, it means *to bring back together*. The original meaning or derivation of the word *confession* is to speak with or to speak together. The words *confess*, *reconcile*, and *connect* all contain a root word that means *with*. These words do not have to do with us as individuals or solitary beings, but as fundamentally connected beings—connected WITH other people, and WITH our spirits, and WITH the Larger Life in which we live and move and have our being.

I'll say a bit more in a few minutes. Now, we will turn to Frances, our Worship Associate, for a reflection.

### Reflection by Frances

For the last several months I have been listening to a podcast by Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber called the Confessional. Every episode features a person who is sharing a part of their life when they were ashamed and how it has impacted them.

Although I have never belonged to a faith tradition where confession is a part of its worship, I understand why “confession” is good for the soul. It is important to have a safe place to say out loud the scary, angry, sad, ugly parts because keeping them “secret” is toxic. As Al anon says you are only as sick as your secrets.

Sharing those secrets with other human beings is a huge leap of vulnerability and faith. Once words are said out loud, they are out there, you can't take them back and there are always consequences. I learned that I had to be careful sharing my thoughts - I have erred in the past with who I have confided in - I have

been judged harshly and relationships damaged. I am much more adept at recognizing when and with whom I can be honest with.

When I keep things hidden in the corners of my soul they grow like slimy mold taking over my thoughts and coloring my view of myself and my self-worth. Saying the scary words out loud is like shining a light so I can see the mold and scrub it away. I feel enormous relief, when I share something vulnerable and hear the words - “me too,” “it's okay to feel that way,” and “no one is perfect”

Even when the person I confess to is kind and empathetic, I still need to deal with my inner critic.

In a recent episode of the Confessional, Bolz-Weber tells her guest - “The Hebrew bible in the book of Job - says the Devil is “**Has atan** - satan - but **Has atan** means the accuser, I just kept thinking of how the accuser functions in the psyche - no it's your fault - constant accusation of who you are and what you have done....Martin Luther said it is the Devil not God who rummages through your garbage looking for already forgiven sins and then rubbing your nose in them and saying this is who you really are. **Has atan** - lives inside of us.”

I have my very own **Has atan**. I have spent years learning to recognize her accusing voice in my head. On days when I feel strong and mentally healthy I can pretty quickly put her in her place. On the days when I am stressed, **Has a tan** and I are usually up very late at night and she whispers - “if only you hadn't done that, why aren't you a better person”. These thoughts bring up my biggest fear - I am not a good person and I do not deserve to be loved.

So when I acknowledge and confess my humanness and all its messiness, it allows room for Grace - and for me Grace is believing that I am worthy of love just because I exist.

Another beautiful thing about confession is that it requires a relationship with another person based on trust and empathy.

Bolz-Weber said this about sharing our confessions with each other: "It is the jagged edges of our humanity that connect us to God and to one another it's not the smooth parts."

I love that image of two jagged edges coming together and becoming stronger - like Velcro.

So I will continue to confess my mis-steps and fears, to myself and to others. I will make space for Grace, and be one half of a velcro-tab for those who need me to listen to their confessions.  
I will choose love.

## Rev. Roger's Homily, Part 2

It is our needed relationships, our need for connections and belonging, which make the act of apologizing an act of humility, vulnerability, and courage. Maybe that's why it's hard to do it.

But in many cases, doing so can help us mature and grow. Clearing the air can free us to connect more easily with others. One clergy person I read about refers to Confession as *Sorry Therapy*. It's good for us. Taking responsibility is good. Apologizing for our mistakes and wrongs is good. But often it's not easy. It can be awkward and embarrassing.

One of my favorite ministerial writers is the Reverend Margaret Marcuson. Recently she posted some great advice about apologizing. Citing one of her own teachers, Marcuson wrote:  
"When you have to apologize, just apologize. Don't elaborate. Don't make excuses, even if the excuses show it wasn't really your fault (like traffic)." She continued: "I realized how often I want to justify myself and explain.... I want to show I was well-intentioned, even if I didn't fulfill my commitments. It's more about me than it is about the other person [when I do that]."

However, she said, "as I've tried to apologize in [a] clean and clear way, I've found it is an opportunity to practice self-regulation. I can say it and shut up, instead of excusing myself. It's also an opportunity to be responsible. Excuses are ways to evade responsibility. Whether I was late for a meeting or a deadline, made a mistake, or unintentionally hurt someone, my behavior had consequences. My intention and all the external factors don't change the consequences."

There's one more bit of advice I want to pass along from Reverend Marcuson. She writes:

“Now, once you’ve apologized you don’t need to do it again and again. When I find myself doing this, it’s also more about me than it is about the other person. I want to reassure myself by repeating my apology. I want them to help me feel better about what I did.

In some circumstances, sharing information may be appropriate—such as that Sunday morning when Zoom crashed.... However, in the ordinary course of our lives ..., there are plenty of times when we do make real mistakes and let people down. Those are opportunities to practice apologizing and keeping it short.

So, try this:

‘I’m sorry I was late.’

‘I’m sorry I forgot to \_\_\_\_\_.’

‘I’m sorry I lost my cool.’”

Then, she said, “Stop talking.”

To summarize her wisdom: apologize clearly and with humility, avoiding the temptation to explain or justify yourself. Don’t make the other person take care of your embarrassed feelings. Just let your honest apology be the sincere offering that it is.

Today I looked over my actions past few days to think about how many times I apologized to other people. I could remember at least one instance for each day, back to Saturday. (I couldn’t remember earlier than Saturday.) So it was at least four days in a row. One apology a day, just like a vitamin. And fortunately, in most of those cases I didn’t repeat myself.

Apologizing and forgiveness can lead to freedom. Whether we are the ones granting forgiveness and letting go of resentments, or

whether we are asking others to do the same for us and accept our apology—it can be a source of renewal, a second chance, a new start, a fresh beginning. At the root, confession has to do with connection—to our own authentic spirits, to other people in our lives, and to the Larger Life in which we live, and move and have our being—the larger life in which we live and move, together. So may it be.

### Silent Reflection

Now I invite you to reflect with me in silence on something for which you’d like to forgive yourself or something for which you’d like to receive the forgiveness of other people. We won’t be speaking about what comes to mind, we’ll just let it rest in our awareness. Now let’s just pause in silent reflection for about half a minute.

### Closing

Thank you. May you find peace and well being in your life. May all of us find peace and well being in our lives.

Next you are invited to join me in a reading. It’s written by the Reverend Rob Eller-Isaacs, a minister who is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist and who is of a Jewish background. Entitled A Litany of Atonement, it’s from our gray hymnal. I will recite the words in plain type and you are invited to hear the words and then respond along with Dan and Frances as they recite the refrain, in bold type.

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<sup>i</sup> George Robinson, *Essential Judaism* (New York, 2016: Atria Paperback), 97.