The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
8:00 a.m., 10:30 a.m.
October 26, 2025

"Confessions"

When I was in sixth grade, we routinely had spelling tests. Of course, this was long before autocorrect and spell check. Then we had to actually learn how to spell a word. As we learned unfamiliar words to expand our vocabulary, we also had to learn their proper spelling. Thus, these tests. The test was usually just ten new words that had come up in that week's readings. The teacher would pronounce the word and might even give a definition. Our job was to spell out the words on our test sheet and then hand it in for grading.

When the tests were returned, marked with the number we had spelled correctly, there were often groans or sighs as our mistakes became evident. Once, I recall a student, a very smart student, raised her hand to make a point. She said that one word was marked as having been spelled incorrectly. She thought that was not right. The teacher countered that, indeed, the word was misspelled. The student responded that it was a typographical error, and it should not count against her. You might think we would all have laughed at such a thought. However, I think a lot of students had no idea what the word typographical meant. The others were astounded at the temerity of the student had to claim she knew the correct spelling, it was merely a typo. She expected to get a perfect grade every time and could not stand missing one.

I do not know anyone who likes admitting they made a mistake. Whether it is one as innocuous as a spelling error or more egregious as causing damage to someone or something. We buy radar detectors not to be better drivers, but so we will not get caught speeding. Spell check fixes our real typos. If a waiter makes a mistake in our favor tallying our check, we do not say anything, but if the error is in the restaurant's favor, we make a fuss and expect the waiter to be extremely apologetic. When we make a mistake in a presentation, we blame an assistant or editor for not catching it. Our child gets into a fight with another child on the playground, and we immediately accuse the other child without investigating what happened. It goes back to when we were children and the first thing out of our mouths was, "He started it."

How does it feel to make a mistake? For most people, it is disappointing. We are disappointed in ourselves, we are mildly humiliated in front of another, we feel our competence and intelligence are being questioned, and most significantly, our ego is scarred. We must admit that we are not as competent as we thought we were. Depending on the severity of the mistake, it can take a while to overcome the aftereffects.

What may even be worse than making a mistake is having to own up to it. I can remember being terrified of telling my parents I had done something wrong at school or at another child's house. If I did not own up to my mistake when I got home, the teacher or friend's parent would surely inform on me. There was no way out. In fact, the punishment would be worse if I tried to hide my error.

Which brings us to the concept of confession. Each week in the Episcopal Church, we confess our sins against God and our neighbor. In many congregations, there is not even a pause where we might contemplate our individual sins. They launch from the call to confession into the formula itself.

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The Rite Two confession is innocuous. We do not confess specific sins. We use general words to encapsulate our misdoings, especially compared to the Rite One version. Listen to the Rite One confession:

> Almighty God,
> Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
> maker of all things, judge of **all** men:
> We **acknowledge** and **bewail** our **manifold** sins
> and **wickedness**,
> which we from time to time most **grievously** have committed,
> by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine Majesty,
> provoking most justly thy **wrath** and **indignation** against us.
> We do **earnestly repent**,
> and are **heartily sorry** for these our misdoings;
> the remembrance of them is **grievous** unto us,
> the burden of them is **intolerable**.
> Have **mercy upon us,**
> have **mercy upon us,** most merciful Father;
> for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,
> forgive us all that is past;
> and grant that we may ever hereafter
> **serve and please thee** in newness of life,
> to the honor and glory of **thy Name**;
> through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.[1]

This is confession language. It is deep, remorseful, and penitential. Yet, I had a seasoned priest tell me that the language did not affect him. He mentioned specifically the line "the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable." Yet, each time I say those confessional words, I feel the weight of my sins.

Confession can be hard. First, we live in a society where taking responsibility is avoided. The best way to deal with a mistake is to deflect or put the blame on someone else. Second, the word sin is toxic. We are uncomfortable saying we have committed a sin because it feels dirty and shameful. Also, churchy people often use the word sin to shine the light on other people's misdoings. Even when we do claim to be a sinner, it is to claim pious superiority over and against those who are not as righteous as we are.

If we are so ashamed of the word sin, perhaps we need to examine ourselves even more closely than we do when we make our confession. If we cannot accept that we make mistakes that harm our relationship with God, with our friends and family, and with ourselves, how can we hope to improve those relationships that mean so much to us? How can we help to usher into our world the Kingdom of God? We need to recognize and name our unworthy actions if we are to overcome them and become more fully the person that God made us to be and the world needs us to be.

Self-flagellation is not required, but a mind and heart that is willing to accept responsibility for our mistakes and mistreatment of others and the world. When we can do this, we can become like the publican in Jesus' parable. Who, rather than congratulating himself on how pious and righteous he is, accepts responsibility for his

[1] The Book of Common Prayer, page 331.

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sins, asks God for forgiveness, and can live a life that is honest and worthy of the God who gave him breath.

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