



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Leon's Disciples
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 26, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

One of the most powerful worship services I have ever experienced happened here last Saturday. It was a memorial service for Leon Hogue, a longtime leader in Calvary's outreach ministry and recovery programs. We offered a time for tributes and nearly every person present came up to the lectern and expressed their gratitude to Leon's sisters, sitting on the front row, for what he had meant to each one of them.

A man who looked like he could play defensive end for the Tennessee Titans broke into tears as he bared his soul about how this one man helped him to make a complete turnaround in his life. A common theme in all the tributes was that Leon not only cared, but he listened. One person said he had big expressive eyes that saw straight through to your soul. A constant refrain was, "He never gave up on anyone."

Our epistle lesson from James gives a vision of the kind of community Leon fostered. It is a community in which people confess their sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that they all may be healed. We can, of course, confess our sins to God at any time. But Richard Rohr writes, "There often needs to be a human mirror to reflect the un-seeable divine gaze, especially if our heads and body are bowed in shame."

For the men who came here last Saturday, Leon was their human mirror reflecting the divine gaze. Because he cared and because he never gave up on them, they knew he was someone they could trust with their most intimate confessions. I can't imagine the courage to confess one's sins to a room full of people around a circle. It takes great courage just to confess to one trusted person. I hope we each find a Leon in our lives. It may be a spouse, a close friend, a spiritual director, or a priest.

One of the most underutilized rites in our Prayer Book is the Reconciliation of a Penitent. I have been on both sides of this rite and it is one of the most healing liturgies in which I have ever taken part. It is really a conversation framed by prayer, in which a person shares her sins, both done and undone, confidentially with a priest. We mutually discuss ways the person can make amends to God, to those who have been hurt, and to themselves. And I love it that one of the forms ends with the priest saying, "Go in peace, and pray for me, a sinner." It is one of the greatest exchanges of mutual love we can ever experience.

We also offer our communal Confession of Sin here each Sunday and in our Daily Office services during the week. There is something renewing about beginning a week or beginning a day with the cleansing of those words. But they are meant to be more than cleansing. The fact that we offer a communal confession reflects the fact that we have participated in communal sin. We are complicit in communal and generational sins. It is not enough to acknowledge that, although that is an important first step. As we see the divine gaze in the human mirror of each other, we accept the unconditional absolution and love of God and the desire to do better in offering that same love to all those around us. We need to change our ways of being and seeing, and then we need to make amends.

Richard Rohr adds, “God does not love us if we change, God loves us so that we can change. Confession is no longer an exercise to achieve moral purity, or regain God’s love, But in fact, a direct encounter with God’s love. It is not about punishing one side but liberating both sides.”

The seeds of confession are planted within us in our earliest rite, baptism. One of the questions in our Baptismal Covenant is: “Will you persevere in resisting evil. And, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” And we respond, “I will, with God’s help.” We teach our children that it is important that they admit when they have done something wrong. Yes, their actions may have consequences. But we first let them know they are loved unconditionally. And we work with them so that their confession leads to a teaching moment of transformation.

Our marriage rite also includes this prayer of confession: “Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to see each other’s forgiveness and yours.” I often invite couples to see their marriage as ‘a little church’ – a home we can go to where it’s safe to confess our sins, a home where unconditional love is always waiting for us, a home where mutual forgiveness and mercy abounds.

Last Saturday, I was given a glimpse of the healing and life-changing power of a confessing community. After every person who wanted gave a tribute, The Reverend Colenzo Hubbard came forward to offer the Prayers of the People. But before he did, he told all of us gathered that we were all now Leon’s disciples, disciples of Jesus in the truest sense of the word. Colenzo commissioned us all to listen to one another, to pray for one another, to encourage one another, to share our confessions with one another, and to pass all this down to the next generation of disciples.

We don’t have to be spiritual giants like Leon to find the healing balm of confessing to someone else, or being a trusting presence and listening ear to someone else who needs to bare their soul to us. All we need is to care. All we need is the courage to be vulnerable. All we need is to know we are loved, no matter what. *Amen.*