

“A Confessing Community”

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"Our soul suspects the truth: that by coming clean, we maybe-just-might be loved and accepted, regardless of what we have done."

- Molly Phinney Baskette, *Standing Naked Before God: The Art of Public Confession*

"I have a confession." Isn't that such a juicy sentence? Nothing can perk me up like hearing it. For me, it's the language of film - even if it's a cliché. But if I'd lost interest in the plot and I hear "I have a confession," I'm hooked, I'm all the way back in.

Because what comes next is the transformation of a relationship. "I have a confession - I love you." "I have a confession - I made a mistake." "I have a confession - I am your father."

These kinds of confessions show to me that something has changed in a relationship. Building this intimacy is vulnerable, but it also builds trust. So many stories seem to go like this: Someone breaks an important vase and doesn't trust that its owner will still think of them as the perfect, capable, responsible person they've shown themselves to be, but when they can't hide it any longer and fess up, their trust deepens as their relationship matures, moving past idealization into a nuanced concept of the other person as someone who makes mistakes but takes responsibility for it - responsible and limited. Maybe the vase owner makes a confession here, too, that though it's a family heirloom, they were always looking for a reason to keep it off display, keeping it out only from a sense of who they were expected to be. By trusting one another with these vulnerabilities, these places where they don't live into the story of the people they most want to be understood as, they can take one another for who they really are.

Molly Baskette, from our reading, was the minister at First Church of Somerville UCC some years ago, and while she was there, she started a practice of asking congregants to give public confessions in the worship service - not to scold or shame anyone. The confession would have three parts - the confession itself - a story of a time of missing the mark, making a mistake, falling into patterns outside of our values - then, a short prayer, and then the "assurance of grace." This "assurance of grace" is the moment in the story where that person is, in a big or small way, transformed or reminded of their wholeness even as it exists within their brokenness. This assurance of grace is the moment in the story where a person was able to claw their way out of a spiral of self-protection and justification after hurting someone else and move towards

repairing that relationship. This is the moment in the story where a person remembers they can ask for help, that they're not alone. This is the moment in the story where a person finds sobriety, where they honor grief rather than running from it, where they recognize that they're scared and acting from fear instead of love and connection.

I could confess plenty to you all. Earlier this week, on the church's social media accounts, I confessed to being shy. No matter how much I love you all, that can make some of this work uncomfortable at times. I have my own support around it, you don't need to worry or accommodate me. I have rituals to help me prepare and places and people I can sink back with after a long day of acting like an extrovert. At the recommendation of a colleague, I listen to particularly exciting music Sunday mornings while reading over my sermon and getting ready to greet.

I don't mean to say that introversion is a "brokenness" in myself or in others. But I know that I've shrunk into comfort in times where meaningful relationships were possible. Specifically, I have shied away from building relationships with folks organizing locally for social justice, and without those relationships, I've shied away from using my voice and my presence to live into my values of compassion, liberation, and love.

I don't share this with you now so that you try to take care of me, or from a place of shame. I share this, because I know that there are places we are all uncomfortable, places we're all scared or nervous or where we feel especially vulnerable, places where we're all broken. I also say this so that we can grow together into a relationship of accountability.

I choose this work, and I keep coming back to it, as uncomfortable as it can be at times, because I've seen how nurturing relationships with the gift of intimacy builds trust, which builds community, which builds resilience.

Molly Baskette writes that there are ways of sharing that might feel like vulnerability, like anonymous online confession sites, oversharing on social media, or other kinds of engagement that keep us in feelings of shame. She sets this apart from the kind of sharing that communities of faith, and, I bet, other intentional spaces, can facilitate. In communities of intention, communities of grace, we don't only find ourselves for what we are or have been. We glimpse our possibility by sharing in this kind of intimate and authentic relationship.

When I share about the relationships I've resisted moving into out of fear in this community that centers love, transformation, and justice, what I find are connectors who know what introductions to make, people who've had successes moving out of fears like this, and folks who are uncomfortable too, people who are trying, too.

This month so far, I've heard from a number of folks feeling scared and broken in this time of year so focused on reflection and intention setting, looking toward the year to come, and looking toward the next few weeks especially. With the approach of an inauguration for an administration that has promised to move this country away from many of the values of justice, equity, and pluralism this congregation upholds, an

administration that has promised to harm communities within and beyond this country's borders, an administration that has promised that "all hell will break out" in Gaza upon his return to the Oval Office - you are not alone if you are afraid, you are not alone if you feel inadequate, you are not alone if you don't know what to do or what relationships to nourish.

Ours is a broken world, and we are broken people. When we bare the places we are broken open, we can interlock in those openings and become resilient together.

Molly Baskette says that these public confessions "saved" the church she served. That seems like a tall order from one element of a weekly worship service. But I believe that, if congregations can become confessing communities, communities where we share our brokenness to grow into community with one another, we have so much to offer one another, whether it's advice when asked for or just a place to feel seen and to belong.

I get support in the broken places from my internship committee here, from Rev. Stephanie, from friends and family and colleagues and my partner and my spiritual director, and they all help me to see the ways I am already in transition, they help me name my feelings, and they help me imagine what else could be, what seeking wholeness could look like. Where are your confessing communities? Who helps you to imagine wholeness in this broken world?