

King David was guilty as guilty as they come. He had committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then killed her husband to cover it up. Then he thought that he was in the clear, until the prophet--his prophet, the royal prophet, Nathan, confronted him with the words of conviction: You are the man. You are the one who has done this horrible thing. The thing you loathe, the thing you despise, the guilt you so easily see in another, it is your guilt.

It was the author Nathan Foster who helped me realize that we often believe that avoidance is an act of strength, a sheer act of will to do away with our pain by looking right past it; by staring right through it, like a magic eye puzzle; and yet, meanwhile, as we are busy avoiding, those past hurts call from within us for liberation. The pangs of guilt that we feel are the soul's cry for healing.

It is the cry of David's soul in Psalm 51: Create in me a clean heart, O God. Put a new and right spirit within me. Don't leave me here in this pool of guilt. David stops avoiding the guilt that is silently killing his soul, and he not only sees it--he names it. He confesses it. And he confesses it in a way that gives each of us words for our own confession: I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.

Ash Wednesday is, itself, a confession. Like any other confession, Ash Wednesday is a painful dose of reality, a confrontation with the truth that we like to avoid, but that we cannot deny--the truth that we are mortal and that we are sinful. As we begin this season of Lent today, we begin our exploration of the practices that make us Christian. And so it is appropriate that we begin with the practice of confession. Confession is the habit of bringing truth out into the light. It is peeling away the layers of lies, or of self-deception, and uncovering the reality of our brokenness.

I imagine myself as a young girl, playing with something fragile that belonged to my mother. It is a small porcelain jar, hand-painted and precious to her. The jar breaks, and I don't know what else to do, so I hide it. I hide the pieces in a secret drawer in my room. And as time goes by, I often forget about the pieces hiding in that drawer, but then one day I am looking for something else, and I open the drawer, and there are the pieces. And I look at them, and I realize that my hope all along was that if I hid the pieces long enough they would have magically been fixed, magically come back together again; quietly, to myself, I wish that hiding the broken pieces was the same thing as healing them.

But it's not. Hiding the truth, hiding our sin, our mortality, our broken pieces, does nothing to heal us.

John tells us of a man who had been lying ill for 38 years. His illness is obvious; he is lying, not sitting, not walking, not dancing, but lying, and he is lying at the pool of Beth-zatha--the place where those who want healing come. He lies there, day after day, and waits. 38 years, day after day, of broken pieces, broken, and hidden away, invisible to the world, unnoticed by those who passed by on their way to healing. Nothing he has done brought healing. He was powerless to move, powerless to pick up his mat, powerless to change his own circumstance. 38 years of waiting; wanting; wishing. But then, his story turns on a dime--it

turns on a single, obvious, question, the question that Jesus asks him: Do you want to be made well?

I imagine the man might have said yes a thousand times to the same question. A thousand other askers may have brought him the same question. But nothing changed. They were powerless to change his life, too.

Rick Lischer notes that regret is not the same thing as repentance. Repentance, he says, "entails a turning away from yourself toward someone who has the authority to give the definitive answer to your entire life. With regret, you're beating up on yourself and loving it. Repentance acknowledges the possibility of an answer that makes things right." Confession, you see, is the first step of repentance, the first step of that turning. Confession lets the cry of our soul be spoken aloud; it gives voice to the secrets we have hidden from others, and even those we so skillfully hide from ourselves. To confess, to speak these aloud takes the courage and the belief that the one who receives it can actually do something about it. You see, the cross of Jesus makes healing and forgiveness a possibility, but confession moves that possibility from way out there in the ether of calvary, to right here into my own life, down on to this mat where I have been lying for 38 years. Do you want to be healed? Jesus asks. To confess is to say, "Yes." Yes, I am mortal; yes, I am ashes; yes, I have sinned; yes, I have failed; yes, I want to be healed and I cannot do it myself. I cannot get myself to that healing place, to that healing pool, but you Lord--you can heal me. Our confession is the act of taking the broken pieces out of their hiding place and holding them up to the one who can give those pieces a new shape. The one who can give this dust, this mortal life, a new shape.

And so we come today. We come to the place where those who want healing come. And we confess. We hold up our broken pieces. We acknowledge that we, too, are lying, that we cannot walk. We come forward, like piles of dust with clothes on, like ashes clothed in urns, and we receive ashes in a new shape. It is the shape of a cross; the seal of forgiveness, of redemption; the mark of the one who heals broken pieces and broken people, and who turns dust into life.

And we stand. And we turn. And we commit to walk a different way.