

The Service for the Lord's Day is a service of Word and Sacrament. We gather in the presence of the risen Christ, who appeared to the disciples on the first day of the week to open the Scriptures and break bread. Following Christ's example, the Church proclaims the gospel through Word and Sacrament each Lord's Day.

An order of worship, also called a liturgy, provides a meaningful pattern for this encounter with God. More than a random sequence of actions, it shapes our faith over time, forming us as Christ's disciples and preparing us to live faithfully in the world.

The order of worship is rooted in Scripture, the traditions of the universal Church, and our Reformed heritage. Centered on Gathering, Word, Sacrament, and Sending, it keeps Word and Sacrament at the heart of the Church's life and worship.

Today we continue exploring the Gathering portion of the service. Last Sunday, we examined the opening of worship, which transitions us from our everyday lives into this time of becoming mindful of the presence of the triune God; we reflected on the Call to Worship. Today, we turn to the next movement of the liturgy: reconciling ourselves with God, ourselves, and our neighbors.

The Presbyterian *Book of Order* (W-3.0205) explains it this way: "Having praised the holiness of God, we must also face the sinful state of the world and of our lives, confessing our unworthiness to enter into God's presence. Nevertheless we approach God with confidence, trusting in the mercy of Jesus Christ. This turn from communal praise to corporate confession, established on the promise of God's grace, is one of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition."

Throughout my thirty years of ordained ministry, the Prayer of Confession is one of two parts of worship that consistently generates conversation—the other is the Affirmation of Faith, which we'll discuss later in this series. Most people appreciate the time of silent confession, when they can bring before God whatever weighs on their hearts. It is the corporate confession that often raises questions.

People have asked, “Why should I confess sins I haven’t committed? I haven’t employed child laborers. I haven’t contributed to the floating mass of plastic in the ocean. I didn’t vote for policies that have harmed vulnerable people around the world. Why should I confess these things?”

The answer begins with recognizing that our lives are deeply intertwined with the lives of others. Whether or not we personally commit every injustice we name, we all participate in systems, cultures, and communities that shape the world around us. Corporate confession reminds us that sin is never merely individual. **We pray not only for our own failings but for the brokenness of humanity, asking that all people—including ourselves—may be transformed by God’s grace.**

Corporate confession can be difficult because we naturally hear it as a personal accusation. But its purpose is not to assign blame. Its purpose is to help us acknowledge the world’s brokenness, our own limitations, and our responsibility to work toward a more just and merciful world. We often confess what we have “done and left undone” because sometimes our greatest failures are not deliberate acts of wrongdoing but opportunities for love that we have overlooked.

A recent example in our own congregation has been the Anti-Racism Moments that Martha Clinger has offered during worship. Some have expressed appreciation for learning about realities that are often hidden in plain sight. Others have wondered whether these moments belong in worship at all.

How might we understand them within the life of worship?

In 2016, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to include the Belhar Confession in the *Book of Confessions*, where it officially appeared in 2017. Written by Christians in South Africa during apartheid, the Belhar Confession proclaims that racial separation and injustice are sins that contradict the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As far as I know, none of us were ever part of apartheid in South Africa. Yet the confession reminds us that systems of oppression are never confined to one nation or one generation. The same sinful impulse that divided people in South Africa has also shaped our own nation's history of slavery, segregation, and continuing inequities. Even if we have not personally created those systems, we are called as Christians to seek justice and reconciliation wherever they persist.

This is not a new problem. Scripture tells a similar story. In Genesis, we read that Joseph was sold off by his brothers to slave traders and taken to Egypt. There he rose to power and for generations the Israelites lived peacefully in Egypt, but eventually successive pharaohs divided society into those who possessed power and those who did not. Fear produced oppression. Human beings were categorized, exploited, and enslaved. God heard the cries of the oppressed and led Israel out of bondage.

Yet even after liberation, Israel continued to struggle. The people forgot God's covenant, worshiped idols, and repeatedly turned away from the One who had saved them. God responded not by abandoning them but by renewing the covenant through Moses and giving the law to help them remember whose they were. Jesus later summarized that entire law in these commandments: love God with everything you are, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Knowing the law, however, has never guaranteed keeping it.

The author of "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" captured our condition perfectly: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love."

No matter the century, sin remains stubbornly alive. That is why the church continues to confess it—not to dwell on guilt but to seek God's transforming grace and to commit ourselves again to lives of justice, mercy, and love.

That is also the purpose of Martha's Anti-Racism Moments. They are not simply Martha's personal agenda. They arise from our congregation's Anti-Racism Policy, in which we commit to "educate ourselves and our community on the historical and current realities of racism and racial injustice." The Council entrusted that work to our Peace and Justice Team, and Martha graciously developed a curriculum focused on the ongoing legacy of anti-Black racism in the United States.

We have also listened carefully to your feedback. Placing these moments at the time we collect the offering disrupted the flow of worship for many people. As we discern the future, one possibility is to incorporate occasional Anti-Racism Moments into the Prayer of

Confession itself. Doing so would connect them directly to our practice of repentance, allowing us to name a particular expression of our shared brokenness while trusting God's grace to move us toward faithfulness.

The Psalmist reminds us, "The Lord is near to all who call upon God in truth," and again, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Those words remind us that confession is never the final word. Grace always is.

That truth brings us to one of the Bible's most beautiful images:

The prophet Jeremiah looked upon a nation fractured by injustice, violence, and unfaithfulness. Grieving alongside his people, he cried, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" His listeners knew exactly what he meant. Gilead was famous throughout the ancient Near East for producing a healing balm, a costly medicinal resin traded across the region. Jeremiah's question was not whether the medicine existed. Everyone knew it did. His lament was that the people's deepest wound could not be healed until they turned again to God. (Jeremiah 8)

Centuries later, enslaved African American Christians transformed Jeremiah's cry into one of the most hopeful songs ever sung: "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul."

Do you hear what happened? Jeremiah asked in anguish, "Is there no balm?" The spiritual answered with confidence, "Yes, there is."

That is precisely what happens in our worship every Sunday.

The Prayer of Confession honestly names the wounds of the world and of our own hearts. The Assurance of Pardon then declares that God's healing has already begun through Jesus Christ. We do not pretend the wounds are absent, nor do we imagine that healing is instant. Instead, we confess that in Christ there truly is a balm for the sin-sick soul.

This movement from confession to assurance echoes throughout Jesus' ministry. Again and again he met people whose lives had been shattered by sin, disease, exclusion, or despair, and he offered forgiveness, restoration, and new life.

Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in John's story of the woman caught in adultery. Religious leaders dragged her before Jesus, eager to condemn her. Jesus simply replied, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." One by one, they dropped their stones and walked away. Then Jesus said to the woman, "*Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.*"

Notice the pattern. Jesus neither ignored sin nor allowed it to have the last word. Grace came first. Forgiveness opened the possibility of a different future.

The same is true at the cross. Jesus bore the full weight of humanity's sin, exposing both its cruelty and its power. Another African American spiritual, "Were You There?," asks each of us, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The question is not historical curiosity but spiritual examination. In one way or another, all of us stand at the foot of that cross. Yet even there God's mercy proves greater than our sin.

That is why the Prayer of Confession is always followed by the Assurance of Pardon. Having confessed honestly, we hear once again that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Baptism has claimed us, grace has cleansed us, and the Holy Spirit sends us into newness of life.

Only then are we fully prepared to hear God's Word. Having laid down our burdens, we are freer to receive the gospel proclaimed in Scripture and sermon.

Now, having heard that Word, we will soon gather around Christ's table, where the same grace becomes visible in bread and cup.

As the New Century Hymnal beautifully declares:

“God hears the confession of our hearts and lips. Through Jesus Christ we are forgiven all our sins, and by the Holy Spirit we are empowered for new life.”

Forgiven and freed, there is indeed a balm in Gilead. Christ invites us to the table, where the wounded are healed, sinners are welcomed, and disciples are nourished for lives of love and service. Let us gather at the table with grateful hearts.