

Witnessing to our faith, Union Congregational Church, March 15, 2009

Like many of you, I travel on airplanes a lot. I've been on 16 flights so far this year, and I have another three takeoffs and landings coming up over the next two days. Most of the time, airline travel is pretty grim: the security checks are tedious, the planes are full, long delays are common.

But sometimes, usually on a longer flight from the West Coast, when there's an empty seat next to me, the food trays have been cleared, and the cabin is dark, I get time to think. It's all too rare in my life: uninterrupted time with no distractions and no place to go, and I get to think.

I want to tell you about my experience on one such flight a few years ago. Of all things, I was thinking about sin and confession.

We liberal Protestants don't talk that much about sin. I'm not sure that's always such a good thing, because we let the discussion get taken over by fundamentalists who seem to compete with each other for who can catalogue the most sins, so that their being saved and somehow having the slate wiped clean can appear all the more as a sign of grace.

Our minister Stephanie reminds us on occasion that sin is that which separates us from God and from each other -- and that's the right way to look at it. But what helped me come to terms with the idea of sin is the formulation in the Book of Common Prayer:

“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;  
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done.”

Sins of omission and sins of commission. I first came across this confession in the services led by William Sloane Coffin at Battell Chapel in New Haven. As best I can recall, we prayed this confession every week, over and over again. After a few dozen times, it began to sink in, and it became part of my mental baggage.

So, on that long flight home from the West Coast, when for whatever reason I was pondering sin and confession, those words came back to me. As I thought about my relationships, about my conversations and interactions with others, especially with those most important to me, with my wife and kids, and how often I'm caught unprepared in the moment to say or do the right thing for that moment -- as I thought about the all-too-many missed opportunities in small and large ways to nurture and build those relationships, I recalled those phrases again:

“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;  
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done.”

And after awhile, in the close and holy darkness of that airplane, I offered up a very short prayer: “Dear God, I have sinned.”

Something happened then that has never happened to me, before or since, in just the same way. I felt what I can only describe as ‘an immense gentleness’ settle over me.

Then these words: “Of course you have sinned. What did you expect?”

And after a pause, these words: “What are you going to do about it?”

All this surprised me of course, but it also made me reflect even more. What am I going to do about it? I came up with several things, and when I got home I wrote them on a card, which I keep pinned on the bulletin board near my home computer. This is what I wrote to myself:

- Pay attention in the moment; be mindful.
- Practice your faith; it takes practice to be faithful.
- Forget about yourself; it’s not about you.
- Use your gifts.
- Love your neighbor.

In the core of my being, I believe that God has called us into relationship, both with God and with our neighbor: in the words of the Gospel of Matthew: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

That’s at the center of my understanding of Christianity; that’s at the center of my faith.

I believe that our life’s work is to make our relationships work – in my case as husband, father, friend, neighbor, citizen of this world, child of God.

The older I get, the more life experience I have, the more important and the more difficult I find this work – and the more often I find myself needing to say:

I have left undone those things which I ought to have done;  
And I have done those things which I ought not to have done.

Perhaps you’ve found yourself in the same situation; perhaps you’ve felt the same thing.

What can we do about it? I think...

- We can pay attention in the moment;
- We can practice our faith, remembering that it takes practice to be faithful.
- We can forget about ourselves, and focus on others.
- We can use our gifts.
- And, we can love our neighbor.

Timothy J. Crist