Welcome to the last Sunday of 2007. I can’t believe I’ve been pastoring here for 18 months … what a blessing to have God and you ask me to be your shepherd. Thank you for this gift of grace. I’m happier than I ever have been in my nearly 27 years of ministry … and each of you is a part of the joy Teresa and I experience day-by-day in our life here with you.

One of the joys of pastoring this flock is the privilege I’ve had to become involved in Celebrate Recovery on a weekly basis. The past six days I’ve been on vacation – and so this morning I’m going to share a teaching with you on the topic of Confession that I shared earlier this Fall with the folks involved in Celebrate Recovery.

Openly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust.

Happy are the pure in heart. (MATTHEW 5:8 | NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (JAMES 5:16 | NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

Does the name Jessica McClure trip any memory bells in your mind? She was the eighteen-month-old girl from Midland, Texas, who fell into an abandoned 8-inch diameter well pipe on 14 October 1987. About four hundred people took part in her 58-hour rescue attempt, which was spurred on by her cries of anguish that could be clearly heard at ground level through the pipe.

Near the beginning of this rescue, a critical decision was made, as the folks in charge decided that the rescue would have two phases: PHASE ONE was to simply get
somebody down there, next to Jessica, as soon as possible; **PHASE TWO** was actually extracting Jessica from the well.

**PHASE ONE** was driven by the knowledge that people tend to **do** and **think** strange things when they’re trapped alone in a dark scary place for long periods of time. They get disorientated and their fears get blown out of proportion. Their minds play tricks on them. Sometimes they even start doing self-destructive things. And sometimes they just give up!

So the rescue experts decided that they needed to get somebody down there to be with Jessica as soon as possible. And that after **PHASE ONE** of the plans was in place, then they’d turn their attention over to how they were going to get Jessica out of the well. The plan worked, and eventually Jessica was rescued.

Jessica had 15 subsequent surgeries - but has no memory of the accident and the rescue - and she still lives in Midland, Texas. On 28 January 2007 Jessica married Daniel Morales ... and when she turns 25, on 25 March 2011, she will inherit the over 1 million dollars that’s in a trust fund that was started for her after her accident as people all over the world sent in donations.

Now, how does the rescue of Jessica McClure relate to **STEP 5**? Well, I’m glad you asked ...

When people like us get serious about both **spiritual growth** and about **recovery** ... when we admit that we’ve fallen down a well and step out on the 12-Step spiritual adventure ... we take that first step by admitting that we have some problems that have made our lives unmanageable.

And we turn to God and say, “God, I need help with those problems.” Maybe in the years, months, weeks, days or hours leading up to crying out to God, you’ve felt like you were **free falling** - like little Jessica falling down that well. **Alone, abandoned, isolated, afraid.** Those are good words to describe us in the midst of the pain and the brokenness of our hurts, hang-ups and habits. We’re out of control in a way. There’s no way we can keep living the way we’d gotten used to living. Our old coping mechanisms just don’t work anymore.

And to complicate matters further, on the way down the well, we find that the problem that we admitted in **STEP 1** is really being driven by a whole collection of character defects, which have been growing five feet down under the surface of our life. And we have to identify those defects. And we have to inventory them. And we have to **list them, admit them, and own them**. We need to take responsibility for our pride, anger, envy, lust, greed, gluttony, and sloth. You know, “the big seven.” **THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS.**

**A SIDELIGHT ...**

**THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS** never occur as a formal list in the Bible. Some people say they’re all found in the Sermon on the Mount, in **MATTHEW 5-6-7**, but there’s not a simple list there. Others say **PROVERBS 6:16-19** is the basis for the list, but it’s a very different list. The bottom line is that this list is very easily traced back to the writings of two men in the 13th Century.
Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a theologian and philosopher, who many scholars believe to be the greatest theologian of the Catholic Church. Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) was a Catholic layman who wrote a three-part epic poem entitled “The Divine Comedy” ... which was about Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

**THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS** figured prominently into Dante’s work because they and their corresponding opposite-image virtues drove the plots explaining why, from a Catholic perspective, people ended up in Heaven, Hell or Purgatory.

In August 1993 MTV did a special on **THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS** which involved interviewing various well-known entertainers from the music and television industry. And in the end, they all pretty much all agreed these seven sins weren’t really vices and that the Dante/Aquinas list was “dumb” and mainly “guilt producing.” Wow. Big surprise.

An online poll for the MTV special came up with the following results by asking people, “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, this ONE is my biggest failing ...”

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LUST 35%  ANGER 18%  PRIDE 12%
SLOTH 10%  ENVY 10%  GLUTTONY 9%
GREED 6%
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But the bottom line is that sin is an issue we all deal with ... sin causes separation between us and God, and sin can only be run away from for so long. Wayne Barbour, a pastor-teacher in Chattanooga, Tennessee put it this way ...

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Sin will take you farther than you ever thought you'd stray.
Sin will keep you longer than you ever thought you’d stay.
Sin will cost you more than you ever thought you’d pay.
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As we honestly and thoroughly work **STEP 4**, we might begin feeling as if we’re trapped at the bottom of a deep, dark well. And if we stay there long enough we can become disoriented and wonder why we ever started on this recovery journey to begin with. In fact, a lot of people even feel like they want to bail out at this point in the journey.

We might start making statements to ourselves like ... “Man, I’m really messed up. Royally messed up.” “No one’s collection of sins and character defects is as bad as mine.” “If anyone ever found out the whole truth about me, they’d never want to have anything to do with me for the rest of their life.”

And so some people get to that point and we say, “Why don’t I just bail out of this program? Why don’t I just go back to projecting an image of adequacy to everybody and not deal with all this unsettling truth about myself?”
And it’s at this critical point in the process that we need to experience what baby Jessica felt while she was trapped down inside that pipe in Midland, Texas 20 years ago. We need to have another human come alongside of us in that well as soon as possible. We need to have someone next to us before we get back into denial, and give up on believing that surrender, honesty and God are the only way out.

In a way, the FIFTH STEP says that we can only grow so far alone; then we reach the point where continued growth and healing is going to require assistance from someone else. And that’s exactly where we are tonight ... right at this critical juncture in the road. We’re at the point where we’re learning the truth and the power of coming clean by telling another human being the truth about who we really are. But how? Through CONFESSION.

I think it’s kind of ironic that you’ve got a priest sharing this teaching with you! Or at least a pastor. I feel like I should be inside a confessional box - you know, me on one side and all of you huddled on the other side.

**CONFESS**

The C in CONFESSION stands for CONFESS. The FIRST STEP is to CONFESS OUR WRONGS. CONFESS our shortcomings, resentments, and sins. God wants us to come clean and admit that wrong is wrong, and that we’re “guilty as charged.” We need to “own up” to the sins we discovered, uncovered and been confronted with while doing our inventory in the FOURTH STEP.

For the person who confesses, shame is over and reality has begun. PROVERBS 28:13 says, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE) I really connect with how Eugene Peterson puts this verse in his paraphrase of the Bible called THE MESSAGE ...

> 13 You can’t whitewash your sins and get by with it; you find mercy by admitting and leaving them.

CONFESSION is necessary for fellowship with God to exist because our sins have built a barrier between us and God and CONFESSION and the forgiveness that follows is what tears that wall down. Listen to the WORD of the LORD from PSALM 32:5-7 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE) ...

5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah.

6 Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him.
7 You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah.

As we CONFESSION our hidden sins, the LORD begins to heal the “sickness” those hidden sins have dumped on us through the years ... maladies like ulcers, tumors, depression, or illnesses that have afflicted us because of our ignorance, or because of the inner conflict that went on inside of us because of unconfessed sin. JAMES 5:16 states “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed.”

The SECOND STEP in CONFESSION is O ... to OBEY GOD’S DIRECTION. CONFESSION means that we agree with God regarding our sins. CONFESSION restores our fellowship with God and opens the door for God’s grace, peace and mercy to come into us.

PRINCIPLE 4 of Celebrate Recovery sums up how to obey God’s direction in confessing our sins ...

1. We CONFESSED [admitted] our faults/sins to ourselves ...
2. We CONFESSED [admitted] our faults/sins to God ...
3. We CONFESSED [admitted] our faults/sins to someone we trust.

In THE GOOD NEWS BIBLE ROMANS 14:11-12 says, “As surely as I am the living God, says the Lord, ‘Everyone will kneel before me, and everyone will confess that I am God. Every one of us, then, will have to give an account of himself to God.”

JAMES 5:16 (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

The THIRD STEP in CONFESSION is N ... NO MORE GUILT.
Living into **PRINCIPLE 4** can begin to restore our confidence, our relationships, and allow us to move past the “rear-view mirror” way of living, that has kept us looking back and second-guessing others and ourselves.

**.PPT 16 …**

In **ROMANS 8:1**, again from **THE GOOD NEWS BIBLE**, the Apostle Paul assures us that “There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus.” In other words, the verdict is in! Like Paul wrote in **ROMANS 3:23-24** ... “All have sinned ... yet God declares us ‘not guilty’ ... if we trust in Jesus Christ, who freely takes away our sins.” (THE LIVING BIBLE).

So that’s the **C-O-N** of **CONFESS**. The “con” is over as we follow God’s directions on how to **CONFESS** our wrongs.

**.PPT 17 …**

The **FIRST STEP** in **CONFESS** is **C** ... to **CONFESS** my wrongs. The **SECOND STEP** in **CONFESS** is **O** ... to **OBEY GOD’S DIRECTION**. The **THIRD STEP** in **CONFESS** is **N** ... **NO MORE GUILT**. The **FOURTH STEP** in **CONFESS** is **F** ... to **FACE THE TRUTH**.

After we “fess” up and tell the truth, four positive changes start to become realities in our lives ...

- **FACE THE TRUTH**
- **EASE THE PAIN**
- **STOP THE BLAME**
- **START ACCEPTING GOD**

**.PPT 18 …**

The **FIRST CHANGE** we begin to experience is that we’ll be able to **FACE THE TRUTH**. It’s been said that “man occasionally stumbles over the truth, but most of the time he will pick himself up and continue on.” Recovery doesn’t work like that. Recovery requires honesty! “Jesus ... said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’”  **(JOHN 8:12 | NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)**

**.PPT 19 … JOHN 8:32** (NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE)

12 You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

I’ve been reading a new book by Brennan Manning lately, called “The Importance Of Being Foolish: How To Think Like Jesus.” Listen to what Brennan writes about the necessity of **FACING THE TRUTH** ...
wounds. Many of us have been lying to ourselves for so long that our comforting illusions and rationalizations have assumed a patina of truth; we clutch them to our hearts the way a child clutches a favorite teddy bear.

Not convinced? Consider the man on his third luncheon martini quoting the Apostle Paul about a “little wine being good for the stomach”; or the “liberated” Christian’s vehement defense of the nudity, violence and explicit sex in so many movies because they’re “integral to the plot and tastefully done”;

Or the upstanding churchgoer who overlooks cheating and manipulation in his business dealings because “it’s the only way to be competitive” … There is no limit to the defenses we contrive against the in-break of truth into our lives.

The FIFTH STEP in CONFESSION is EASE THE PAIN.

Have you ever noticed that people who speak the truth are always at ease? The SECOND CHANGE that CONFESSION brings is to EASE THE PAIN.

You may have heard the common recovery statement that “We are only as sick as our secrets!” Author Frederick Buechner puts it this way in his book Telling The Truth …

“Each of us not only has our secrets, we are our secrets.”

When we share our deepest secrets, we begin to take the sting out of the pain and shame our secrets force us to live with. And as this pain begins to ease, a new, healthy self-worth begins to develop - a self-worth that’s no longer based on the world’s standards, but is based on the truth of Jesus Christ and on our new life with Him.

Somebody once said that “Pain is inevitable for all of us, but misery is optional.” PSALM 32:3-5 says in THE GOOD NEWS BIBLE …

There was a time when I wouldn’t admit what a sinner I was. But my dishonesty made me miserable and filled my days with frustration … My strength evaporated like water on a sunny day until I finally admitted all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, ‘I will confess them to the Lord.’ And you forgave me! Now all my guilt is gone.

The SIXTH STEP in CONFESSION is STOP THE BLAME.
It’s been said “The person who can smile when things go wrong probably just thought of somebody they can blame it on.” But the truth is that we can’t ever find peace or serenity if we continue to blame others or ourselves. Our secrets have isolated us from each other long enough – preventing intimacy in all our important relationships.

Jesus tells us in *MATTHEW 7:3* (JB PHILLIPS | THE NEW TESTAMENT IN MODERN ENGLISH) …

3 Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and fail to see the plank in your own? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me get the speck out of your eye,’ when there is a plank in your own? … Take the plank out of your own eye first, and then you can see clearly enough to remove your brother’s speck of dust.

The **FIRST STEP** in **CONFESSION** is **C** … to **CONFESS MY WRONGS**. The **SECOND STEP** in **CONFESSION** is **O** … to **OBEY GOD’S DIRECTION**. The **THIRD STEP** in **CONFESSION** is **N** … **NO MORE GUILT**. The fourth step in **CONFESSION** is **F** … to **FACE THE TRUTH**. The **FIFTH STEP** in **CONFESSION** is **E** … **EASE THE PAIN**. The **SIXTH STEP** in **CONFESSION** is **S** … **STOP THE BLAME**. And finally, the **SEVENTH STEP** in **CONFESSION** is **S** … and this final step invites us to **START ACCEPTING GOD**.

Gang, now is the time to **START accepting God’s forgiveness**. Not until we accept God’s forgiveness are we able to look others in the eye. Because in forgiveness we begin to see ourselves and our actions in a new light. In **PRINCIPLE 5** we move toward being able to discover and live into the humility it takes to exchange our shortcomings in for God’s forgiveness.

In *The Living Bible, SECOND CORINTHIANS 5:19* says …

19 For God was in Christ, restoring the world to Himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them but blotting them out.

If you asked me to sum up the benefits of **PRINCIPLE 4** in one sentence it would go something like this …

In **CONFESSION** we open our lives to the healing, reconciling, restoring, uplifting grace of Jesus Christ who loves us in spite of ourselves.

**FIRST JOHN 1:9** tells us that “If we confess our sins, God will forgive our sins, because we can trust God to do what is right. He will cleanse us from all the wrongs we have done.”
Maybe in the past you’ve been a little fearful when thinking about **CONFESSION** and how God wants to use it as a spiritual discipline in your life to bring about change and conformity into the “family likeness” of Jess Christ. I hope that this morning you’ve been *encouraged*, and I trust you’ve been able to see the benefits of this task God brings to each of us and invites us to begin living into.

**JESUS, KING OF ANGELS**

Words and music by Fernando Ortega

Jesus King of angels, heaven’s light,  
Shine Your face upon this house tonight.  
Let no evil come into my dreams.  
Light of heaven, keep me in Your peace.

Remind me how You made dark spirits flee.  
And spoke Your power to the raging sea.  
And spoke Your mercy to a sinful man.  
Remind me Jesus, for this is what I am.

**CHORUS**

The universe is vast beyond the stars.  
But You are mindful when a sparrow falls.  
And mindful of the anxious thoughts  
that *find me ... surround me ... and bind me.*

With all my heart I love You Sov’reign Lord.  
Tomorrow let me love You even more.  
And rise to speak the goodness of Your name.  
Until I close my eyes in sleep again.

**CHORUS**

Jesus King of angels, heaven’s light,  
hold my hand and keep me through this night.

Dear God, thank You for your promise that if we confess, You will hear us and cleanse us, easing our pain and guilt. Thank You that You always do what is right. In Jesus’ name ... **AMEN.**