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I miss the days of my Chicago Tribune comics, but one of the newer strips that appears in the Tucson paper has recently been having fun with a woman who thinks her parents should be baby-sitters for her own kids, and at the same time seems to believe in a real hovering and smothering type of parenting.

Times have changed and parenting with it; my parents sent me to Boy Scout camp and moved while I was away without giving a forwarding address.

Actually, while they were very responsible and kept tight restrictions on me, my parents were not so protective as that woman in the comic. When I was seven years old and in second grade — at least as I recall it, — we had but one car, which my dad used to go to work, and my mom had my kindergarten aged brother Russ and two year-old sister, Jeanne, at home, so it is probably not all that surprising that she would occasionally give me a dollar or change to go to the grocery store to get the occasional item she needed, even though it was across a fairly busy two lane street — Lake Street, US 20, on the west side of Elgin, which some of you would know and which I had to cross to go to school, anyway. It had to have been a day when I was home from school for lunch — school was walking distance, which meant about two miles in that era, uphill both ways, — and as I walked through the store's checkout lane, an unusual looking piece of candy, a square, foil wrapped candy bar, caught my attention, and I put it into my pocket, knowing I was doing something wrong.

And when I got home, I felt guilty enough that I told my mother.

I honestly do not remember beyond that. I think she told me to stop at the store on the way to school and give them the five cent price, I just do not recall, but as for most of you, no doubt, my first act of *confession*, of voluntary confession, was to my mother. She did not yell at me, I suppose since I already knew I had done wrong, and it certainly had no longer term impact on her trusting me, but it was confession to another human being of a specific sin, though “sin” would have meant nothing to me at the time.

Whether I would have told my not-quite five year-old brother, I do not know, but confessing to a brother — or sister, except that the community which he was addressing was all male — confessing to a brother in Christ, *confessing a specific sin to a brother in Christ*, is the major concern of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the final chapter of *Life Together*, his words to the community of students and faculty in the underground because illegal seminary they shared during the mid-1930's as the Nazi's were strengthening their control not only over Germany and its people, but over the Protestant church in Germany.

I have been using *Life Together* — conveniently, for my purposes, divided into five chapters — to be an inanimate muse to me for my messages during the five Sundays of Lent prior to Palm Sunday, and my reason has been that, although we are hardly facing the Nazi's in this country, Christians in parts of the world are suffering as did the Jews of Nazi Germany, and that even in the larger part of the planet in which there is not persecution of Christians, we, like those in Bonhoeffer's seminary community, face a

world that both needs and yet is often hostile to the idea and person of the Jesus whom we proclaim. And what I hope we have accomplished to some extent is to find ways to strengthen us as a community, a particular kind of community, so that individually and as a community we can indeed carry Christ into that world.

I have no intention to restate the first four of those sermons, other than to repeat the distinction I have drawn between two different concepts of love in the Greek language at the time of the New Testament, *agape* and *philiōs*, and the differing kinds of community described by each. *Agape* is selfless love such as our love for God and, more significantly, God's love for us, and *philiōs* is "brotherly" or *fraternal* love. In a *philiōs* or fraternal community or fellowship, we expect to get something from others in return for what we offer; our participation is not *selfless*. In an *agape* community, we give to others expecting nothing in return, for our "love" for one another is based not on liking the other or wanting to spend time with the other, but rather based on the others' being, as are we, a child or children of God, and because the other is in Christ and Christ is in the other just as we are in Christ and Christ in us. A *philiōs* or fraternal community or friendship is great and an *agape* community does not preclude the presence of fraternal love and friendship, but is something more.

But in fact we do — or should — get a particular something, Bonhoeffer suggests, out of that *agape* community, when we do something that I suspect few of us — including me — would be comfortable doing, when we so to speak, "let our hair down" by *confessing specific sin to another member of the community*.

*When we "let our hair down,"* and if you had doubted whether I would ever resort to puns, that doubt is dissolved, for I am using that expression because of the way Mary, as she is named in our reading from the Gospel of John, anointed Jesus' feet. I suspect the editors of the Lectionary chose the John passage over the more-or-less parallel story in Luke because in John the story is very much related to Jesus' anticipation of his death and burial. But the Luke version is interesting because the unnamed woman is described as "a sinner" and her tears mix with the ointment as she wipes his feet with her hair. And while the sin is not specified, it is apparently publicly known, and since in Luke Pharisees and others criticize Jesus for associating with tax collectors and prostitutes, the Bible story reminds me of an incident I believe I have shared [in Florence] of one Sunday night back in 1965, when my late wife, Carol, and I and an English basketball-playing friend and his wife went to a Vesper service at a small Anglican church outside Cambridge, England, to which the girls wanted to return during the week to make brass rubbings. I remember the vicar's asking, in his thickly accented voice, the question, "What chance would a prostitute have in this congregation?"

And that relates to one of two — the unexpressed one of two — concerns in Bonhoeffer's desire for the *Confessing of specific sin to another member of the community*. I suspect Bonhoeffer's relative youth and the fairly sheltered life he had led until that time might have contributed to his optimism about doing this, but it possibly relates to a concept he raised in one of his best known works, *The Cost of Discipleship*, the

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concept Bonhoeffer termed, “cheap grace.” “Cheap grace” was (or is) the idea that we happily accept forgiveness for our sins without that forgiveness’s having any impact on us. Bonhoeffer’s premise in confessing a specific sin to a brother or sister is that the other will pass on to us forgiveness because he or she knows God’s forgiveness for his or her own sins, *and also implicit, I believe*, is that such confession is *less cheap*, more sincere — and I would add, “higher risk” and thus more meaningful to us — than simply confessing to God, and that confessing a specific sin — including in our prayers to God — is more meaningful than simply, “I confess my sins.”

I am big on sin — I mean, I am big on confession of sin, because I do feel I am aware of my own sinfulness and my need for forgiveness. I am, however, going to hedge on the degree to which I would recommend or participate in the exercise Bonhoeffer recommends. Forgive me; that I do not necessarily trust others to then be as forgiving of my sins as I am grateful to God for being forgiving is a measure of my sinfulness, not of their or your trustworthiness.

But . . . but . . . since I am not ready to let my hair down in front of all of you, I am not going to ask anyone of you to turn to his or her neighbor, and confess a specific sin to that neighbor. No, but what I do want to ask is this: Ask yourselves what we would do if one of our fellow church family members came to us and confessed to us some sin of his or hers that would strike us as a terrible sin; What would we do?

If we found out that one of our married brothers or sisters was having an affair, what would we do? Would we spread gossip about him or her — I use the term, “gossip” irrespective of truth? Would we shun the brother or sister? *What chance would a prostitute have in this congregation?*

This sort of hypothetical — the affair — raises the question as to the extent to which we really want to know the answer to: “What Would Jesus Do?”

Let me be blunt; Jesus does not approve of that sin; Jesus would say, “Go, and sin no more,” but Jesus’ entire being would make no sense without adding or prefacing with, “Your sin is forgiven,” to that “Go, and sin no more.” That is essentially the beautiful, whether true or not, story of the woman caught in adultery; it is the indisputable message to the repentant sinner found in last week’s reading of the beautiful story of “The Prodigal Son,” which is not just a story about the son — in whom we are to see ourselves — but even more so a story of the forgiving father, in whom we are to see God, to see God and *to model ourselves!*

And an *agape* community, a community that wishes to be strong enough to carry Jesus into the world, cannot ignore within its own fellowship what it seeks to proclaim to the world outside: acceptance of the other as a sinner like ourselves, as a *forgiven* sinner like ourselves.

And what I am asking of all of you is this: Take a few seconds — if you are like me it will take very few, — and think of a specific sin you commit or committed; silently confess it by naming it to God, and ask

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forgiveness; ask that you be sincere in wanting not to commit that sin again; then *thank* God for forgiveness. And if you can do that sincerely, I think you will have at least a few grams of burden lifted from your shoulders. Please do it.

Now, what I would want from this *agape* community is that we can look around and say to ourselves, "That person is capable of forgiving me, because he (or she) has had his (or her) sin forgiven by God, and knows what that means."

And if we can sense that others are willing to forgive because they know they have been forgiven, we can actually receive something from being in the community, even if we still do not like or enjoy the other person and his company; we have received reassurance of God's forgiveness.

And do not tell me the world would not value that, even though too often those in the world have too much difficulty concluding that some things are right and some things are not.

I began, sort of, these sermons by saying that in the encounter of two Christians in an *agape* community, and of course we are not limited to two, what is happening is that the Christ in me is encountering the Christ in thee, and *vice versa*; Christ is present in all relations in our community.

But I want to put a bit of a modifier on that; the Christ in me busy forgiving my sins is in you forgiving your sins.

I hope we are all grateful for that. I do not know that we shall ever be ready to let our hair down and confess our worst sins to another member of the community, but that if we are not, it be only that we have been so humbled that we think no one's sins could be so bad as our own.

Even if we are not ready to *let our hair down*, may we make it clear to one another — and then to the world, — that because of what Jesus has done for us, we are ready to hear and to forgive. For in forgiving we do indeed imitate Jesus, and become Jesus to those who need him, including our brothers and sisters, sinners, all of us.

*What chance would a prostitute have in this congregation?* I would hope the answer is, "to experience *agape* from the rest of us sinners." For *grace* truly is amazing.

Amen