

"Killing Me Softly" was originally written by a trio of songwriters after a singer named Lori Lieberman attended a Don McLean concert (the guy who sang "American Pie"). At the concert, McLean performed a song called "Empty Chairs", which is about the singer wandering through his empty house, mourning that his lover has left him. Lieberman was so moved by the song, she went home and wrote a poem that eventually became the song "Killing Me Softly" (which was soon recorded by Roberta Flack, who made the song a hit).

[1 **Guitar & Girl**] "Killing Me Softly" is a song about a song. The singer is listening to a singer, and she's connecting so viscerally with the song, she feels as though the singer is reading her private journals and letters for everyone to hear. She feels exposed, naked before the gathered crowd. She feels known too deeply, too intimately.

If you're anything like me, you can imagine exactly how she feels. We all have secret shames, parts of our Selves, habits and behaviors we don't want known. We are well-practiced at crafting false faces, personae that are more socially acceptable. So the thought of being exposed freaks us out too.

But as terrifying as it sounds, being known is *good*. There's a freedom in exposure we can't experience while we're cowered behind our walls. If we are willing to let down our guard, to be truly and wholly known, we find the freedom to be ourselves, to relax, to spend our time loving rather than protecting.

But we can only find that freedom in honesty, in the practice of confession.

[2 **Hiding**] Hiding is the easy choice, but it's not the *best* choice. When we choose to hide, we end up with communities that are fake. We end up with people pretending to have it all together while struggling secretly, alone.

Hiding creates hypocrites. Hiding creates a community of people all wishing they could be real but afraid to come into the light.

Hiding is the easy choice, but it's not the *best* choice. The best choice is to step into the light of God's love. Because when we realize how wholly and truly we're loved, we realize that love destroys the shame, fear and guilt we've been living with, and frees us to love in return.

[**Scripture Slide**] If you have a Bible, turn with me to John 3. Jesus has just met with a powerful man from Jerusalem, who's sought him out to get a bead on him - Jesus' teaching is already causing quite a stir. Jesus has just explained that he came to die, that he'll be lifted up so that everyone can have life. And this next bit of his conversation explains *why* he is giving everyone life.

Read with me, beginning in verse 16:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but

whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. -- John 3:16-21

God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world. God didn't send Jesus to point at all the sinners, hiding in the darkness with their secret shames, to call out "I know what you did, and you're all going to HELL!"

[3 **Life Preserver**] No... God sent Jesus to save the world. John tells us that if there *is* judgment, it's that when the Light came, people were *afraid* to come into the light because of what they'd done. *We* judge *ourselves* to be unworthy of God's love, when God has shown us how much he loves us.

Hiding is easy. But it's not best.

The good news is that Jesus makes a promise: If you come into the light, what you've done will be seen, and you'll learn God already knew what you did, and loves you anyway.

[4 **Good & Bad**] Now... that's not what it sounds like. It sounds like Jesus is saying, God loves good people and hates bad people. Good people in the light. Bad people in the dark, where they belong. And John knew that's how it would sound, so he follows up this teaching with an illustration of exactly what Jesus means (which John often does in his stories - teaching followed by a real life example).

Flip over to John 4 with me. In this particular story, [5 **Map of Samaria**] Jesus has left Jerusalem and is headed back to his home in the Galilee. Between Jerusalem and the Galilee is an area called Samaria, and to say the Jews and Samaritans hated each other is a nice way of putting it. The Jewish people hated Samaritans so badly they usually went *around* Samaria rather than taking the most direct route through it.

So of course Jesus decides to go through Samaria. And on his way, he stops at a town called Sychar. His followers head into town to buy food. While they're gone, Jesus hangs out at a well. It's high noon, and a woman comes to the well to draw water.

If we were ancient readers, red flags would be going off all over the place. In Jesus' day, unrelated men and women didn't spend time alone together. And in every village, women went together to the well to draw water, at the beginning and end of the day, when it was cooler. The fact that this woman is coming by herself in the middle of the day means she's an outcast in her town (and we'll find out exactly why in a moment).

So Jesus, the light of the world, is hanging out at the local watering hole. And a scandalous, outcast *Samaritan* woman approaches him. She is literally the furthest from God possible in the eyes of most of Jesus' contemporaries. If there's *anyone* who's "in the dark", it's her. Let's read what happens when she meets Jesus:

Jesus came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” -- John 4:4-26

We could spend *hours* on this conversation. But the important thing to note is the weird jump the woman makes. She and Jesus are talking about water, and then Jesus drops the bomb on her: he knows her history - that she's had 5 husbands and is currently living with a man who isn't her husband. And then she starts talking about religion. [6 **Confused**] What?

We ought to make an observation about the difference between this culture and ours - we hear her relationship history and assume she's a sort of serial monogamist, jumping from marriage to marriage. But in Jesus' day, women didn't have the right to divorce or to choose marriage - that power belonged exclusively to men. So we can safely assume this woman came from a bad situation - her family was poor, or her father died before she could be married. And for the last who-knows-how-long, she's been passed among the men in her town, married 5 times, and then cast away 5 times. At this point, she is not even worthy of marriage in the eyes of her town, so she lives off the charity of some man who exploits her flesh for pleasure but won't honor her with a marriage.

It's safe to say she's ashamed. No wonder she hides in the dark. Only for her, the dark is the heat of the day, beating down on her as she trudges shamefully toward the well.

And then she meets Jesus. And like the singer of "Killing Me Softly", she listens as he tells her whole life story. In one sentence, he exposes all her secret shames, drags into the light what has kept her apart and excluded.

But the strangest part is there's no condemnation in his voice. He's not trying to use her like every other man in her life. He's not shaming or blaming her. He's... treating her like a human.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he's a prophet - how else could he know so much about her?

Look at Jesus' promise in chapter 3 again:

Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

[7 **Jesus and the Well**] This woman by all accounts was "in the dark". Except she's not - because when the light comes to her, when the light shines on her deeds and they're seen plainly, she doesn't scurry back into the dark. Not because she's not ashamed - she clearly has been. But because this holy man stands before her, singing her life with his words and his song is a love song.

Even though he knows her completely, he does not condemn her. Because Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn the world.

And so in light of his love, his welcome, she dares to believe he might have come to [8 **Life Preserver Jesus**] save her. She asks about God, about who has it right - her people or Jesus'. And Jesus tells her it's not about Temples anymore because God has come to them, to all of them.

And then, he tells her he is the Messiah, the long awaited rescuer. This is huge - Jesus hasn't told *anyone* that he's the Messiah yet, but he lets this shameful, sinful woman in on it.

Because it doesn't matter what we've done. God hasn't come to condemn us, but to love us.

It's worth our time to pause for a moment and hear this fully and truly. Jesus tells us that the light has come into the world to save, not condemn. That the difference between those in the light and those in the dark isn't what you've DONE, but *how you respond to Jesus*.

It doesn't matter what you've done. It only matters how you respond to Jesus.

Jesus stands before you, knowing you completely, intimately, and offers you love. Not condemnation. Not judgment.

[9 **LIGHT AND DARK**] The judgment is *yours*. Will you stand tall in the light, or slink back into the dark?

But of course, the singer of "Killing Me Softly" isn't in anguish because the singer knows her. It's because he's telling her story to everyone gathered, listening to his song. And *that's* the real shame - that *everyone* knows her secrets.

Even if we can embrace the good news that God knows us and loves us, we can't imagine that the people around us would be half so kind. We know that if the people around us knew *that*, we'd be ostracized. Outcast.

Some of us know that from personal experience. We've brought a doubt, a struggle, a secret shame to someone we thought loved us, confessed it to them and felt their judgment and condemnation.

We can be excused for being gun-shy around those with itchy trigger-fingers.

But would you believe that receiving judgment and condemnation for our questions and failures and shame isn't the rule, that it's the exception? Would you believe that while Lori Lieberman sits there, listening to Don McLean, sure that she's the only one exposed, everyone else who's ever lost anyone is listening as well, feeling that same sense of exposure and shame?

Isn't that, in fact, *why* this song is still so popular, over 40 years later? Because *everyone* knows exactly how she feels?

[10 **Confession**] That's the surprising secret of confession - *everyone* feels shame and guilt. We all have those experiences. No what causes those experiences isn't the same, but we all fear being exposed. We all fear the judgment and condemnation that comes with stepping into the light.

We're all Lorie Lieberman. We're all Roberta Flack. We're all the Samaritan woman. We all need to meet this man who offers not condemnation and judgment but freedom and love.

And when someone - like Roberta Flack, like the Samaritan woman, stands up and says, "Look what I did", most of the time, most people respond with a deep sigh of relief. We see someone else confess their secret shames and we say, "Wow... me too!"

That's what happened in Sychar... after her encounter with Jesus, the woman rushes back to her village. John tells us what happened next: **Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did."** -- John 4:39

Many in the town believed the woman's testimony. Now she *obviously* told them more than just "He told me everything I ever did." But the part of her story that stuck wasn't Jesus' thirst or his witty banter or their deep theological conversation about whose Temple was the right one. It wasn't even that he said he's the long-awaited Messiah.

The part of her story that resonated with this town (who, by the way, had been shaming her a long time) was, "He told me everything I ever did."

This is the true power of confession. When we step into the light, confident that our deeds are known, and we are loved and understood and welcomed, we become a beacon of that same light.

Everyone else, sitting in the shadows, feeling their secret shames, sees us step into the light, says, Woah... maybe I could do that too!

My friend Anne Marie Miller calls this the Gift of Going Second. Her book *Permission to Speak Freely* details her struggles with depression, pornography and more. As she recounts her stories, she shares of the freedom and love she's found in God and in God's people. And toward the end of the book, she calls us to join her in confessing.

Because in confession, among friends, we find love and welcome. We can mirror for each other what Jesus did for the woman. When we choose to confess, we let those who hear us to say, Me too! When we go first, we allow them to go second.

So in what context do we confess? In a booth, with a priest? No, at least not in our tradition. And I'm certainly not suggesting we open the platform to a parade of confessions in front of the whole church - confession ought to take place in a much more intimate setting.

The best way at Catalyst to confess is to build a Life Transformation Group. Our LTGs are small groups of 2-4 people. We don't have a system to sign up or build them because it's very important you connect with people you trust, people you consider to be SAFE. LTGs meet to read scripture together, to pray and to share with each other.

[11 **Groups**] Some of you are not in LTGs yet. This is a great opportunity to prayerfully consider what it would look like to start one. Even if you're not ready for an LTG, you hopefully have someone close to you, a friend you can trust, a safe person.

These are the persons we confess to. We choose to give them the gift of going second. We choose to follow the Samaritan woman, to step into the light not because we are perfect, but because we are intimately known and wholly loved.

Can you imagine if our church were a place free of shame, free of guilt, free of the condemnation that comes with judgment? Can you imagine if we stood before our communities, our friends and neighbors and said, Come meet the man who told me everything I'd ever done!

Choose to practice confession this week.

Communion

We come to the Communion table today as the Samaritan woman, walking out of the darkness into the light of Jesus' own body. We approach this table as she did that well, in trepidation. We bring our whole selves, every secret shame, every question and doubt.

We approach this table and we find Jesus, his body broken for us, his blood spilled to offer us a new relationship with God. We approach and find that God's love for us enables us to stay in the light, to be made new. God's love enables us to return to our world boldly, confident in our status as God's children, that we might give others the gift of going second.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to participate in Communion. Jesus invites everyone - including Samaritan women - to his table. If you're willing to step into the light, to be known and loved, then you're welcome to come meet Jesus.