

I've heard many recovering alcoholics say they've never found a church quite like Alcoholics Anonymous. They've never found a community of people so honest with one another about their pain, so united in their shared brokenness.

"The particular brand of love and loyalty that seemed to flow so easily [in recovery meetings] wasn't like anything I'd ever experienced, inside or outside of church," Heather Kopp says in her memoir about getting sober. "But how could this be? How could a bunch of addicts and alcoholics manage to succeed at creating the kind of intimate fellowship so many of my Christian groups had tried to achieve and failed? Many months would pass before I understood that people bond more deeply over shared brokenness than they do over shared beliefs."¹⁸

The other day I was asked in a radio interview why I'm still a Christian. Since I've never been shy about writing through my questions and doubts, the host wanted to know why I hang on to my faith in spite of them.

I talked about Jesus—his life, teachings, death, resurrection, and presence in my life and in the world. I talked about how faith is always a risk and how the story of Jesus is a story I'm willing to risk being wrong about. And then I said something that surprised me a little, even as the words left my mouth.

"I'm a Christian," I said, "because Christianity names and addresses sin. It acknowledges the reality that the evil we observe in the world is also present within ourselves. It tells the truth about the human condition—that we're not okay."

"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed," instructed James, the brother of Jesus (James 5:16). At its best, the church functions much like a recovery group, a safe place where a bunch of struggling, imperfect people come together to speak difficult truths to one another. Sometimes the truth is we have sinned as individuals. Sometimes

NINE Dirty Laundry

Churches should be the most honest place in town, not the happiest place in town.

—Walter Brueggemann

IN MANY CHURCHES, THE HOLIEST HOUR OF THE WEEK occurs not in the sanctuary on Sunday morning but in the basement on Tuesday night, when a mismatched group of CEOs and single moms, suburbanites and homeless veterans share in the communion of strong coffee and dry pastries and engage in the sacred act of telling one another the truth.

They admit their powerlessness and dependency. They conduct "searching and fearless inventories" of themselves. They confess to God, to themselves, and to one another the exact nature of their wrongs. They ask for help. And beneath the flickering of fluorescent lights, amidst tears and nervous coughs and the faint scent of cigarette smoke, they summon the courage to expose their darkness to the light: "My name is Jeremy, and I'm an alcoholic."

the truth is we have sinned corporately, as a people. Sometimes the truth is we're hurting because of another person's sin or as a result of forces beyond our control. Sometimes the truth is we're just hurting, and we're not even sure why.

The practice of confession gives us the chance to admit to one another that we're not okay, and then to seek healing and reconciliation together, in community. No one has to go first. Instead, we take a deep breath and start together with the prayer of confession:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent,
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*¹⁹

The Lutheran Confiteor makes it even more personal:

*I confess to God Almighty,
before the whole company of
heaven and to you, my brothers
and sisters, that I have sinned in
thought, word, and deed by my
fault, by my own fault, by my*

*own most grievous fault;
wherefore I pray God Almighty
to have mercy on me, forgive
me all my sins, and bring me to
everlasting life. Amen.*²⁰

These brave prayers are just the start. Like the introductions at an AA meeting, they equalize us. They remind us that we all move through the world in the same state—broken and beloved—and that we're all in need of healing and grace. They embolden us to confess to one another not only our sins, but also our fears, our doubts, our questions, our injuries, and our pain. They give us permission to start telling one another the truth, and to believe that this strange way of living is the only way to set one another free.

So why do our churches feel more like country clubs than AA? Why do we mumble through rote confessions and then conjure plastic Barbie and Ken smiles as we turn to one another to pass the peace? What makes us exchange the regular pleasantries—"I'm fine! How are you?"—while mingling beneath a cross upon which hangs a beaten, nearly naked man, suffering publicly on our behalf?

I suspect this habit stems from the same impulse that told me I should drop a few pounds *before* joining the Y (so as not to embarrass myself in front of the fit people), the same impulse that kept my mother from hiring a housekeeper because she felt compelled to clean the bathroom *before* the Merry Maids arrived (so as not to expose to the world the abomination that is a hair-clogged shower drain), the same impulse that Nadia refers to as the "long and rich Christian tradition which in Latin is called 'totally faking it.'"²¹

The truth is, we think church is for people living in

the “after” picture. We think church is for taking spiritual Instagrams and putting on our best performances. We think church is for the healthy, even though Jesus told us time and again he came to minister to the sick. We think church is for *good* people, not *resurrected* people.

So we fake it. We pretend we don’t need help and we act like we aren’t afraid, even though no decent AA meeting ever began with, “Hi, my name is Rachel, and I totally have my act together.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed this same phenomenon at the underground seminary he served during his protest of Nazi Germany:

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone in our sin, living lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we *are* sinners!²²

My mother used to tell me that we weren’t the type of people to air our dirty laundry. What she meant was good Southern girls didn’t go around talking about their troubles or divulging their secrets. (I can only assume it is by some divine corrective that her daughter turned out to be a blogger.) But this is a cultural idiom, not a Christian one. We Christians don’t get to send our

lives through the rinse cycle before showing up to church. We come as we are—no hiding, no acting, no fear. We come with our materialism, our pride, our petty grievances against our neighbors, our hypocritical disdain for those judgmental people in the church next door. We come with our fear of death, our desperation to be loved, our troubled marriages, our persistent doubts, our preoccupation with status and image. We come with our addictions—to substances, to work, to affirmation, to control, to food. We come with our differences, be they political, theological, racial, or socioeconomic. We come in search of sanctuary, a safe place to shed the masks and exhale. We come to air our dirty laundry before God and everybody because when we do it together we don’t have to be afraid.

My friend Kathy Escobar spent many years climbing the leadership ladder at a megachurch in Denver before trading a life of religious success for what she calls a life of “downward mobility” inspired by the humility and poverty of Christ. As a counselor, Kathy had encountered Christians who kept their battles with pain and depression a secret from their churches, so she helped found and pastor the Refuge, an eclectic and growing faith community in Denver inspired by both the Beatitudes and the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Kathy discovered that when a church functions more like a recovery group than a religious organization, when it commits to practicing “honesty for the sake of restoration,” all sorts of unexpected people show up.

“People who make \$600 on mental health disability and never graduated from high school are hanging out with friends who have master’s degrees and make \$6,000,” she said of the Refuge. “Suburban moms are building relationships with addicts. People from fundamentalist Christian backgrounds are engaging those with pagan backgrounds . . . Orphans,

outcasts, prostitutes, pastors, single moms and dads, church burnouts, and everything in between are all muddled up together . . . It's wild."²³

Kathy, who describes herself as a recovering perfectionist and control freak, doesn't glamorize the process. She admits the healing happens at a slow pace and that this much diversity often leads to awkwardness and drama. It's not exactly what you call a seeker-sensitive model—"most people don't go to church to get annoyed," the petite blonde says with a laugh—but through the Refuge she has experienced mercy, grace, love, and healing like never before. She says she'll never go back to the upward-mobility life again.

Rather than boasting a doctrinal statement, the Refuge extends an invitation:

The Refuge is a mission center and Christian community dedicated to helping hurting and hungry people find faith, hope, and dignity alongside each other.

We love to throw parties, tell stories, find hope, and practice the ways of Jesus as best we can.

We're all hurt or hungry in our own ways.

We're at different places on our journey but we share a guiding story, a sweeping epic drama called the Bible.

We find faith as we follow Jesus and share a willingness to honestly wrestle with God and our questions and doubts.

We find dignity as God's image-bearers and strive to call out that dignity in one another.

We all receive, we all give.

We are old, young, poor, rich, conservative,

liberal, single, married, gay, straight, evangelicals, progressives, overeducated, undereducated, certain, doubting, hurting, thriving.
Yet Christ's love binds our differences together in unity.

At The Refuge, everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable.²⁴

Imagine if every church became a place where everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable. Imagine if every church became a place where we told one another the truth. We might just create sanctuary.