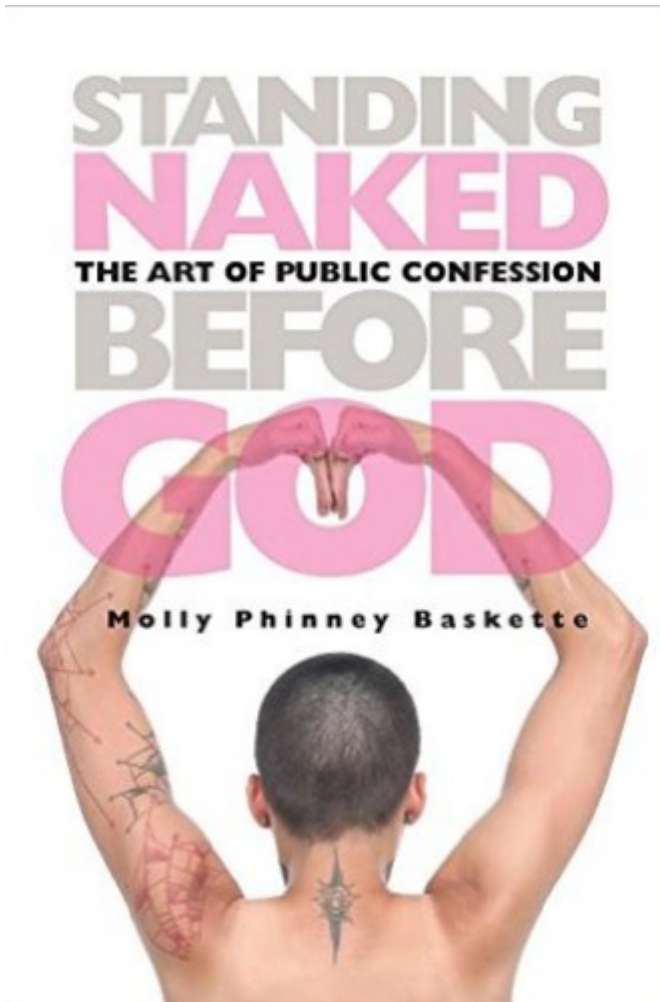


Standing Naked Before God, by Molly Phinney Baskette

reviewed by [Shawnthea Monroe](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Standing Naked Before God

By Molly Phinney Baskette
Pilgrim

Recently, a parishioner came to my office to discuss the order of service. “The prayer of confession has got to go,” he said bluntly. “All that talk about sin is depressing. I don’t come to church to feel bad about myself.” I tried to explain the

theological importance of confession and pardon in the Christian tradition, but my words fell on deaf ears. Apparently he was taking the John Wayne approach to faith: “Never apologize.”

Frankly, I think going to church and not talking about sin is like going to the gym and paying a personal trainer to tell you that you look great: you know it’s not true and that’s not really why you came. Yet, like many of my mainline colleagues, I struggle with how to make the confession of sin spiritually meaningful. That is why I was excited to read Molly Phinney Baskette’s *Standing Naked Before God: The Art of Public Confession*.

Baskette’s 2014 book *Real Good Church* detailed the resurrection and regeneration of First Church Somerville, United Church of Christ. In this follow-up volume, Baskette describes one key to her congregation’s success: the public confession of sin. Every week, after prayerful and careful preparation, a liturgist stands and offers a personal confession of sin followed by an assurance of grace. These risky acts of self-revelation have transformed First Church Somerville, and Baskette believes that the model can work in other congregations.

The book begins with a short outline of the spiritual and psychological benefits of truth telling: “Truth and grace run in opposite directions along the same freeway, and if you give one, you get the other.” There is also a brief but effective taxonomy of sin, differentiating between individual sin and corporate sin, as well as between sins of strength (commission) and sins of weakness (omission). Baskette does a fine job of challenging society’s false binary of good versus bad. She reminds us that each person has good and bad in them and contends that public confession enables us to tell this truth to God and to ourselves.

Next Baskette outlines the principles and procedures that shape public confession, offering helpful hints and answering frequently raised objections, such as “I have nothing to confess!” (Answer: Think again.) She even includes templates for correspondence, though they are written in a style that might require some adjustment.

Having sketched out the why and how of public confession, Baskette devotes the majority of the book to the actual confessions and prayers offered by liturgists. These “truest stories” (as Baskette calls the confessions) are touching, even moving, but rarely do they qualify as a confession of sin in any traditional sense.

These are modern, liberal sins: reliance on fossil fuels, addiction to social media, and lack of self-care. People confess to being controlling, introverted, short-tempered, and pessimistic. Some confess to being unlucky in love, others to being bad with money. A number of liturgists admit that they are unsure about God but devoted to First Church Somerville. Reading these confessions, I was reminded of Bishop Fulton Sheen's comment, "Hearing nuns' confessions is like being stoned to death with popcorn." There is a lot of popcorn here.

The one exception is a chapter titled "Recovery." These are the white-knuckled, courageous confessions of addicts, people who struggle to stay sober and who know the pain—and the power—of truth telling. These prayers are harrowing and brutally honest, capturing the redemption and release that lies at the heart of the Christian story. I found myself wishing the chapter were longer.

There are other strong elements in this collection. I loved the prayers by Serenity Jones, a self-described drag queen and social activist whose love of Jesus Christ jumps off the page. Another man uses the story of Lazarus to explain his lifelong battle with depression. It is a battle he ultimately loses, but I'll never forget the last line of his prayer: "I'd say my prayer for this day . . . is simply for continued courage as I, like Lazarus, shamble toward the light up ahead."

Baskette has a gift for writing liturgy. Her language is fresh and bright, and the book contains a number of corporate prayers that would enrich any service of worship. She also uses metaphor and analogy in a creative way that breathes new life into old theological categories. Yet there are clear signs that this volume was written in a hurry. Baskette's theological argument is underdeveloped, and her engagement with scripture seems cursory.

In the end, *Standing Naked Before God* is not a robust example of the Christian practice of confession. I suspect that the problem is one of definitions. With a nod to Paul Tillich, Baskette defines sin as "anything that separates us from God, others, or our own best self." With such a broad definition, almost any form of self-revelation counts as confession of sin, and most of these prayers are actually just testimonies. It reminded me of Lillian Daniel's excellent book *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*. But testimony is not quite the same as confession.

Instead, what Baskette offers us is a glimpse into the life of a mainline progressive church that is thriving against all odds. Because she sees the Christian life as a heroic undertaking rather than a weekend hobby, she expects her church members

to do hard things, like stand in front of their friends and neighbors and trust them with their truest stories, revealing their most authentic, wounded selves. Call it what you will, this practice inspires the kind of holy intimacy that binds people together, transforming them from a congregation of fellow travelers into a living, breathing body of Christ. That makes this book good news.