



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
April 15, 2018 Sermon

Evidence of Eastertide: Forgiveness

Scripture Lesson: Luke 22:54-62; John 21:15-19

Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

Alfred Hitchcock called them crescendoes—those two or three scenes in a movie which are the most important, which are the touchstones for the plot, which you want to be the most memorable, which, if you got them right, might well win you an Oscar or two or three. Now the scene I'm about to read contains just such a crescendo. It's the scene from Luke's Gospel where Peter denies Jesus three times. The crescendo is in verse 61 where, after Peter's third denial, Jesus turns and looks at Peter. So imagine your directing a movie about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. (Yes, it's been done before, but that doesn't mean it can't—or won't—be done again.). Your going to go close-up, of course, with a quick-cut from Jesus to Peter. But what do you say to your actors to get them inside this scene so that they get it right? How would you describe the look on Jesus' face when he turns and looks at Peter?

Listen now for God's Word . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

Our Second Scripture Lesson has another crescendo, corresponding to the first. It is some days after Jesus' resurrection. The scene is on the beach, early in the morning; the disciples have been out on a boat fishing all night. Around daybreak, the risen Jesus appears on the shore, calling them in, even sharing breakfast with them. Now after breakfast, he speaks to Peter. The crescendo is verse 17, when Jesus ask Peter for the third time: "Do you love me?"?

Again, imagine you're the director. Your going to go close-up, of course, with a quick-cut, this time from Peter to Jesus. How do you get your actors inside the scene? How would you describe the look on Peter's face when Jesus asks him, for the third time, "Do you love me?"?

Listen now for God's Word . . .

Easter is not just a Sunday, but actually an entire season, at least on the church calendar. The season runs from Easter Sunday, all the way to Pentecost Sunday, which this year will fall on May 20. Fifty days in all, during which we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and "walk in the newness of His life." So during this Easter season, I want to walk in this newness of life with you. "Evidence of Eastertide"—is what I'm calling this sermon series. Today: forgiveness.

Imagine what Peter felt on that Saturday, that Saturday after Good Friday and before Easter Sunday, when Jesus was crucified and dead. Shock, disbelief, pain, grief, overwhelming, unbearable loss . . . He had committed the unforgivable sin—he had denied the Lord. He, Peter, had promised, sworn, he would always stand up for Jesus, always stand by Jesus, and he hadn't. He had denied Jesus and run away. There was no denying that now, no running away from that now, try as he might. The rest of his life he would have to live with that. The rest of his life would be learning to live with that—and he never would. *This* defines me, *this* is who I am, *this* is my life—forever. He would forever be known as—forever be—the one who denied Jesus. Not once, not twice, but three times.

I once had a classics professor, who had read all the classics, and he said that, in the ancient world, the number three always meant multiplicity going on forever. One could stand alone in singularity. Two things, could stand together in dynamic tension. But three meant that this was going on—or at least could go on—forever. He was a brilliant, eccentric man, a great scholar—we students would always sit in class, looking sideways at each other, mouthing, "Where does he get this stuff?" But I've come to think he was right. Once can be an accident. Twice, unfortunate. But three times? That's you. That's who you are. Three strikes and you're out.

In imagining what Peter felt, shame is as good a place to start as any. Many an ancient moralist believed that shame was a good and healthy thing, both for an individual and a society. If a person feels shame, it shows that he or she still has a conscience, a sense of right and wrong. When Adam and Eve sinned, they hid from God—in other words, they were ashamed, which means all was not lost for them. In a shameless society, people not only do wrongs but flaunt them, go on TV to brag about them, or worse still, compete to go on TV to behave shamelessly, the highly edited results of which we call, “reality television,” as if such shamelessness-shamelessly-packaged-as-entertainment was the essence of reality. (Look on the bright side: at least reality television hasn’t yet affected our politics.)

But shame is not always healthy, not always a good thing; it can be toxic, to the point of paralysis and self-loathing. We can spend our lives hiding, covering up, from God, the world, even ourselves. We come to believe that this—whatever this is for us—does define our lives and who we are. We don’t want anyone else to know, of course, but deep down, maybe in a place we can’t acknowledge even to ourselves—we believe that *this* is who I am—forever.

And because shame is so potent, it can be made it into a weapon, and used to hurt, humiliate, and control people. If you tell a person long enough and loud enough that he or she is *this* or *that*, if you insinuate enough, bully, name-call, mimic, or berate enough, pretty soon people come to believe they are this or that, which makes them ashamed which much easier to intimidate and manipulate—which is precisely the point. And even when we’re no longer subjected to such abuse by that bully, that teacher, that coach, that authority figure, that so-called friend, or family member, even years and decades later, we can still carry that shame within us. It’s a deadly weapon internalized. And while weaponizing shame is by no means unique to the church, it’s a tactic that has been frequently employed by those in the church, especially her leaders, much to our eternal shame.

Because it is the exact opposite of what the church should be about. Jesus came into this world not to shame us for our sin, but to save us from it. That’s what Peter learned on the beach that morning.

Peter already knew that Jesus was alive, that he had been resurrected. He had already seen him. Jesus had appeared to all the disciples, including Peter, while they sat in that locked upper room on that first Easter evening. Peter had seen him with his own eyes—he was alive! And that was wonderful news, great good news. But was it good news—for Peter? Does Jesus’ resurrection mean that Peter’s sins are forgiven? It was that look, Jesus’ look of sadness and love for Peter, that look on Jesus’ face when Peter denied him for the third time, it was that look that Peter could not forget. That look that left him wondering: “Yes, wonderful, but are *my* sins forgiven? After what I did, can he still love *me*?” That’s the question on Peter’s heart, the question that still haunts him, deep down, maybe in a place he can’t acknowledge even to himself.

I can’t tell you how many people—many of them good, church-going Presbyterian people, people I admire, good, beautiful people—I can’t tell you how many people have told me, slowly, indirectly, hesitatingly, that while God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ is of course a wonderful, beautiful thing—it’s really not for them. For others, of course; for the whole world, of course; for the whole universe, of course; but not for them. They believe that their sins—that they themselves—are somehow beyond the bounds of God’s forgiveness.

They really do.

Sometimes, I want to ask them “What makes you think that you and your sins are so special?” (I know, not accepted counseling technique, but sometimes. . .) “I mean, really, on the scale of comparative sins (there’s no such a thing, by the way), yours would hardly move the needle.” But I don’t have to say that, and I don’t have to ask that. I know what they’re feeling, because I feel it myself. They feel their sins are unforgivable because they are *theirs*, and they feel them: feel their weight, their shame, the hold they have on their lives—deep down, maybe in place where we can’t acknowledge it even to ourselves: *this* defines me, *this* is who I am, *this* is my life—forever. You feel it. I know I feel it. Yes, Jesus was resurrected, but, really, not for me.

What we need, I think, is a good, old-fashioned altar call. That’s right: a good old-fashioned altar call. Now, Presbyterians don’t do altar calls. Other denominations do altar calls, Billy Graham did altar calls, but we Presbyterians most decidedly do not do altar calls.

You know what altar calls are, don't you? They come at the end of the service, when the preacher calls people down front, to the so-called "altar," to give their lives to Christ, to make their decision for Christ. The ushers guide them down, briskly, efficiently. The organ plays softly—the choir humming—"Just as I am, without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me. O lamb of God I come to thee."

We Presbyterians most decidedly do not do altar calls. And for good reasons, both theological and ethical.

First, theologically, because it's not an altar. We Presbyterians insist that this is a table, not an altar. An altar is where you perform sacrifices. But Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was once and for all, sufficient for all creation. The last altar of all was the cross on which Jesus died. The priest does not somehow re-do that sacrifice, when he breaks the bread or pours the wine here at this . . . table. Jesus is the lamb of God, and his sacrifice on the cross was more than sufficient to redeem us and all of creation.

Also, ethically, because the "altar" call emphasizes *our* action—*our* coming forward—in a moment of decision, a moment of great emotion, our decision to give *our* lives to Christ. But moments, by definition, do not last, and our emotions change. Hence, to use the technical term, backsliding: once the moment passes and the emotion fades, people slide back into their old way of life, hence the need for another altar call and another decision for Christ, and then another, and still another—and, well, that's a lot of decisions for Christ, without any real, lasting change. In contrast, Presbyterians emphasize God's decision for us, that Christ gave his life for us, once and for all, not for a moment, but for eternity. We say that God's love is unchanging, however much our feelings may change; that the lamb of God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and that the church is the community, the body, of believers into which God calls us, and through which the Holy Spirit is regenerating us into newness of life throughout our whole lives (By the way, Billy Graham was admirably aware of all these concerns: during his altar calls, he would emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit, the need for people to take their decision for Christ back to their homes, workplaces, and everyday lives, and he'd tell them to go to church that Sunday.)

All good Reformed, Presbyterian stuff—I like it; I believe it. But still I feel the need for a good, old-fashioned altar call. Why? Well, go back to Peter on the beach for a moment.

Peter had an altar call that morning. He was able to affirm his love for Jesus, not once but three times. And he received forgiveness and new life. The third time was the crescendo: Now, it's Peter who looks at Jesus with love and sadness, "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you." That's three times, and in the ancient world, three meant a multiplicity going on forever. Three times, and that's who you are. Three affirmations, and you're in.

And in return, Peter receives Jesus' forgiveness. Jesus gives Peter his new life, his mission for life—"feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." He's saying to Peter, "it's not your denial of me that defines you and your life, it's your love for me and my church. *This* is who you are, Peter, you will forever be known as—forever be—the one who loved me and my church."

And it proves true—almost immediately. If you read the Book of Acts, you see Peter time and time again standing up for Jesus, standing before the councils and the authorities, being scorned, flogged, and imprisoned, risking death time and time again, to proclaim Jesus as Lord, the son of God, crucified and risen. Peter, the one who could not acknowledge Jesus before a serving girl, now proclaims him boldly to the world. And he would do that for the rest of his life to the death—the death that Jesus' word on the beach foreshadowed. It's a whole new Peter, a whole new life. Jesus came to Peter not to shame him for his sin, but to save him from it.

Peter needed an altar call. And sometimes we do, too. Yes, even we Presbyterians. Our sin and our shame has such a deep and powerful emotional hold on us that sometimes it takes an even deeper and more powerful emotional experience to break that hold. Sometimes, it takes an even deeper and more powerful emotional experience for us to believe that Jesus saves us from our sin, that his death, resurrection, and forgiveness, are for us, and for me. Not always, mind you. Billy Graham's own conversion experience was decidedly non-emotional and non-dramatic, as was C.S. Lewis', and many others. But sometimes that dramatic, emotional experience is needed to walk—or to keep walking—in newness of life.

But we're Presbyterians, and we don't do altar calls; we don't even have an altar. So what to do? Today, I propose a seated table call. That's right: a seated table call. Stay in your seats—you don't have to come forward or rush for the exits, for that matter; ushers, stay right where you are, too.

Now hear me say this: the only way that we're going to overcome our shame so that it doesn't debilitate us, doesn't paralyze us, doesn't make us hate ourselves, the only way we're going to overcome that false shame that others have hatefully put on us and that we still live with, the only way we're going to do that is to know and believe that God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has forgiven us. God has forgiven us. God has forgiven you. Hear me say that, and now look at this table. Look at this table, and remember Jesus' sacrifice, Jesus dying on the cross, his resurrection, his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins—the world's sins, our sins, your sins.

Look at this table, and remember that. And now, shut your eyes. Shut your eyes and think of something you're ashamed of. Could be a big thing, could be a little thing. Recent or going way back. Part of a larger pattern in your life, or an anomaly. Doesn't matter. Just think of something you're ashamed of. Take a moment, stay there, feel it.

John, a few bars of "Just As I Am" please.

OK, now the crescendo moment: Jesus is looking at you with sadness and love; you are looking at him with sadness and love. He is speaking to you. It's not me, Richard, speaking to you, it's Jesus speaking to you through me.

Now, you're going to say your own name under your breath. Don't be embarrassed—nobody's looking at you; they all have their eyes shut, too. So say your own name under your breath. []

Jesus is speaking to you now: "Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Now, say your name under your breath again. []

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Now, that thing you're ashamed of?—Hear him speaking to you now about that: that does not define you or your life. That is not who you are. *This* does. *This* is who you are:

One more time, your name under your breath.
[]

Still Jesus speaking to you now: "Do you love me?"

"Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you."

Now take a moment. Stay there. Feel it.

You can open your eyes.

In Jesus Christ, you—we—are forgiven. Let us walk together in this newness of life.

Amen.