



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
March 1, 2020 Sermon

“MY BAD!”: The Season of Lent

Scripture Lessons: Joel 2: 12-14, Luke 18:9-14

"My bad!": an expression of contrition uttered after making a bad pass or missing an open shot.—Chuck Wiegus, *The Back-In-Your-Face Guide to Pick-Up Basketball: A Have-Jump-Shot, Will-Travel Tour of America's Hoop Hotspots*, 1986.

When Manute Bol throws a bad pass, he'll say, "My bad" instead of "My fault," Now all the players say it too.—*USA Today*, Jan. 27, 1989.

Although a street term, 'my bad' is virtually synonymous with the earlier Latin phrase, 'mea culpa'.—*The Phrase Finder*, an online dictionary.

Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

Today is the first day of March, the first Sunday in March, the first Sunday in Lent,—which raises a question: should we, as Protestants, as Presbyterians, give up something—food or otherwise —for Lent?

The Protestant Reformers were suspicious of such practices, especially the practice of fasting (more on their reasons for this later). One Bible passage they liked to quote on this question was from the Old Testament prophet, Joel.

For the ancient Hebrews, rending your clothes—tearing them—was an outward, public display of profound emotion, usually profound sorrow. But the problem was that sometimes it was *only* an outer display. What Joel says in this passage is that it's the inner feeling, not the outer display, that matters: "Rend your hearts not your clothing." And yet what he says about God is even more important: "God, is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Listen now for God's Word . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

"The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite heart."

In this story, a story that Jesus tells, he lifts up a tax collector as an example of this. This tax collector does make some outward display of his sorrow, he can't help it: he pounds his chest as he prays. But it is clear that this outward display of contrition reflects his inner state, his heart. And this, Jesus makes clear, God finds acceptable. Listen now for God's word to us . .

Sermon:

Little did they know—those young people playing pick-up basketball back in the 1970's—little did they know that, among their many slang and catch-phrases, one in particular harkened back to a Latin phrase in a prayer which can be found in the Roman Mass as early as the 10th century.

Little did they know, those same playground players, that this same phrase would make its way not only into the NBA by the 1980's, but also into the idiom of ordinary Americans and eventually gain its own entry in the American Heritage dictionary, the dictionary of the renowned usage panel that was originally created to protect the language from slang phrases.

The phrase of course is 'My Bad!' and the basketball player pounds his chest and says it to his teammates, as he's running back on defense after throwing a pass into the third row. "My bad, man, my bad." Which is exactly what the priest says and does in the Roman Mass, only in Latin, "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa."

In an increasingly secular society, where traditional religion is much less pronounced and much more private, some of our deepest religious impulses, and especially those that require shared expression and acknowledgement, tend to show up elsewhere in public, supposedly secular, events.

Look at college sports, for example: the traditions and rituals, the unison chanting and singing, the colors and pageantry—Script Ohio, crossing out the "M's" Carmen Ohio, the Victory Bell, and "O" . . . [H-I-O]—need I say more? It's all religious, I tell you, religious in the root sense of the word: it binds us together.

And one of our deepest religious impulses, one of our deepest religious needs, is to acknowledge our faults and to feel the hope of overcoming them. I'm not sure why this acknowledgement, this hope, needs to be shared, but it does. Confession is good for the soul, I suppose.

I mean: it's no secret, after I throw the ball into the third row, that it was indeed my fault: when I pound my chest and say, "My bad!" it's not like I'm telling my teammates, my coaches or the fans anything they don't already know. But still the players do it. Maybe they need to say it aloud to their teammates, and maybe we need to say it aloud to our co-workers, friends, and family, because, by saying it, we mean to say something like: "Yes, I'm at fault, I acknowledge it. But I can do better, I can be better, I am still part of the team—we are still bound together."

This is the first Sunday in Lent, the time in the church calendar when, according to Gregory the Great of the sixth century, we say "My Bad!" Actually Gregory didn't quite put it that way, but it was Gregory who established the Lent as a forty-day period of fasting and penitence in preparation for Easter, beginning with Ash Wednesday and excluding Sundays. (Sundays are excluded because on Sundays—even during Lent—we celebrate Jesus' resurrection—and penitent fasting is not the right response to that; joyful gratitude is.)

But when it comes to the public acknowledgement of fault—both religious and athletic—there's a certain ambiguity: yes, a great potential for good, but also a distinct possibility of misuse.

Sometimes my making a big show of "my bad," is only a show, with no real feeling of contrition behind it whatsoever. What I'm really saying, when I say "My bad!" is "It's no big deal; I'm still good, we're still good, it's all good—just forget about it." Which is why the coach sometimes says to errant-passer: "Yes, it really **was** your bad, and there's a seat right here on the bench next to me where you can think about just how bad it was—for a long time."

In Christian terms, this can even get to the point where saying “*I’m* bad” really means “*I’m* good.” In other words, “Look at me, as I fast and pound my chest: I, unlike the rest of you, acknowledge my sin—not just once but over and over and over again.” And this implies (although I don’t say it, of course) that I’m better, more pious, more godly than you are.

On the other hand, it’s also possible to dwell on our sin so much that it seems impossible to overcome it: It’s just who I am, and what I’ll always be.

This is why the Protestant Reformers were suspicious of all the public displays of penitence, whether it be fasting or wearing a hair shirt, or self-flagellation, or giving up something for Lent.

Because by doing so, we risk either false pride or despair, or maybe both: false pride in the ‘goodness’ of ballyhooing our badness; or despair in dwelling on our sin so much that it seems inescapable, or maybe both in that our outward displays of penitence intended to hide our deeper despair, if only from ourselves.

So maybe it is better to keep our penitence private, to make it an entirely inward matter: mend your heart and not your garments.

Maybe. And yet . . . And yet . . . We are bodily creatures: what we do with our bodies matters, it affects who and what we are. And we are social creatures: our sense of reality needs to be shared. It’s why, when a player makes a great pass, we turn to the person next to us, and say, “Did you see that?!” Well, of course—we both did. But somehow it’s not really real until we confirm it with one another.

So any sense of penitence that doesn’t involve our bodies—has no physical correlative—and doesn’t involve other people at all—is entirely private—well, really—how real is it to us?

And if we do keep it all private—keep our need to acknowledge our faults and to feel the hope of overcoming them entirely private—there’s a good chance that it, along with our other religious impulses, will show up somewhere else, in other public, supposedly secular events, such as college sports, rock concerts, and the like.

So to get to the question of the morning: should we give up something for Lent or not? Of course, I’m not suggesting that we should give up our brackets, March Madness, the NCAA Basketball Tournament! NO WAY! I’m religious, but I’m not crazy. May God and the tournament selection committee grant UD’s men’s team the #1 seed they so richly deserve! Forever and ever. Go Flyers! Amen.

But I am suggesting that perhaps college sports, and other such secular events, don’t satisfy our deepest religious impulses, the deepest longings of our hearts, including the longing to know that we can do better, we can be better, that we are still part of the team—we are still bound together—that God is with us.

And that’s why we come to the communion table on the first Sunday in Lent. Because it is here that God is with us, in Jesus, redeeming us from our sin, binding us together with God and with one another. Jesus is present here, giving us light and life, just as the sun is in

the sky giving us light and life, even when we can't see it, even when it took 29 days in February for us to see it.

So I leave it to your conscience and your judgment whether to give up something for Lent or perhaps to take up, something, some new spiritual practice, such as daily prayer or Bible-reading. What I will recommend is this: Come, taste and see that the Lord is good. Here, at this table, is forgiveness; here is hope; here is new life:

Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.