

Apologies and Apologetics
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Philippians 3:17-4:1

Perhaps it is just a coincidence, though I really don't think so. Or, perhaps it is because our media-driven culture loves to create public figures and then watch them fall, like one big reality show, which, I imagine is more the reason, but in the last two weeks, the world has seen two very high-profile apologies.

The first came from golfer Tiger Woods, speaking plainly into the camera and offering his best apology for his sexual misbehavior and the damage it had done. His confession dominated the news cycle and lit up the airwaves and the cellular waves everywhere.

Opinions varied. One British journalist in The Telegraph wrote that it was a "master class" in saying 'I'm sorry,' an example that bankers and politicians should follow. Another person, however, said it was just a stunt, but she happened to be the lawyer for one of Tiger's women, a former porn star, seeking financial gain from the whole ugly and tawdry mess.

Time will tell whether Tiger is changed ... and whether he can climb back into leader boards and the hearts of golf fans everywhere.

This last week brought another apology, one with a very different set of circumstances. The chairman of the board of Toyota, the grandson of the company's founder, appeared before Congress to apologize for his company's safety-related failures. A public apology from such a high-profile Japanese leader is the twenty-first century equivalent of how his ancestors would have chosen to fall on their sword as an act of duty, humiliation and penance.

Without a doubt, both of these apologies, Tiger's and Toyota's, have clear commercial consequences. These acts of submission are intended to stop the image hemorrhaging. In that way, they bear little resemblance to the apologies most regular people ever make.

But at some level, whether it is in a press conference or in the living room of a private home, an apology is an apology. We have all made our share and we will probably make many more. The big ones are usually the hardest to make, sometimes

excruciatingly so. But they are also the most important. They fuel the healing process and the change in behavior that must follow if healing is to continue.

Real apologies shouldn't come too easily and they shouldn't be taken too lightly. It is no accident, for example, that making amends is one of the last steps in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Other steps come first – such as submitting to a higher power, making a “fearless and searching inventory” of one's self and listing all the wrongs one has committed and to whom. Then, and only then, the Twelve Step manual says one is ready “make direct amends” but only if an apology does no further harm.

Some of those same steps may be a good part of our walk in this season of Lent, a time of self-examination and repentance. As many of us heard at our midweek service last Wednesday, Rev. Eric Guthrie, a chaplain at CMC-Mercy Hospital, put it well in his meditation. We can treat this Lent as just another Lent ... or not. Rev. Guthrie used the scriptural story of the fig tree that would not produce. It was about to be cut down, but a gardener intervened and appealed to the land owner to give it one more year. Rev. Guthrie's point was clear – we should never assume we have forever when it comes to repenting and making amends, with each other and with our God.

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Now ... at first glance, our lectionary reading from Philippians may not seem to connect to this journey of repentance we travel in this season of Lent.

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church at Philippi from prison. But his tone is surprisingly upbeat. He gives thanks for the congregation at Philippi, for their prayers and gifts, and he rejoices in their success in spreading the gospel with integrity.

Paul knew the church in Philippi was under pressure, both political and pagan. Philippi was a colony of Rome, populated largely by Roman soldiers and others loyal to the emperor. Their earthly pledge of citizenship was to Rome.

But Paul commits an act of treason of a sort. Despite the fact that it would only lengthen his time in prison, Paul encourages the flock there to pledge their citizenship not to any earthly power but to God in heaven, seen most clearly in Jesus Christ.

Paul made no apology. To the contrary, in Philippians and so many other letters, he offered what was called an apologetic. It's odd but our modern word “apology” has come to bear little resemblance to its old-fashioned cousin, apologetic. An apologetic was a reasoned defense or argument for something, not a retreat from it. So, in a

sense, Paul's letters, which make up about half of the New Testament, were all apologetics, reasoned defenses of the faith that had claimed him and changed the course of his life.

But in these verses from Philippians, Paul gives us something more than just a sound apologetic. He gives us a pattern for the Christian life, one that, in particular, expresses the journey from Lent to Easter.

Referring to the return of Christ, Paul writes:

“(Christ) will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” That's worth saying again

Do you hear the Lent-to-Easter pattern there - from humiliation to glory? Paul celebrates the resurrection glory of the empty cross and the open tomb. But, first, he says, came Christ's humiliation ... his submission to his enemies, his trial, persecution, suffering, abandonment and crucifixion.

Both humiliation and humility are part of our lives at some point.

Some of us have had life experiences that have humiliated us, events and times when we feel out of place or ignored, abandoned and helpless, even value-less in the eyes of others or in the eyes of our God. Those who have been rejected and left cold by a spouse surely know humiliation. Serious physical illness puts us in touch with those same feelings. It strips us down and shows us our frailty. It shows us what it feels like to be made low. Humiliation happens, and in it we can see a tiny glimpse of Christ's own physical humiliation, his persecution and suffering.

Humility on the other hand is something that we can strive for, to seek to achieve. Humiliation may come from circumstances or other outside sources. But humility requires a reorientation of our minds and hearts, a different way of understanding our importance in relation to others, a perspective that one's reality is not the only reality or even the most accurate.

While humiliation may make us feel more dependent on God, humility brings us closer to God in another way. The Psalms tell us the God guides the humble to what is right. Proverbs declare that with humility comes wisdom.

In yesterday's session planning retreat, one elder said that a wise woman always knows what she doesn't know. That, too, is humble wisdom. From the way she put it, though, I suppose it remains to be seen whether we men have grasped that.

The British author and theologian C.S. Lewis captured the beauty of humility in his book, The Screwtape Letters. Screwtape is the name of a senior devil. The book is made up of his letters to a junior devil who is trying to derail a young man struggling with his faith. Screwtape knows God's ways and his advice includes a warning about the power of true humility. Referring, naturally, to God as "the enemy," Screwtape writes:

"The Enemy wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in that fact, without being any more (or less) glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another The Enemy wants each man in the long run to be able to recognize all creatures (even himself) as glorious and excellent things. He wants to kill their animal self-love as soon as possible; but, it is (the Enemy's) long-term policy, I fear, to restore to them a new kind of self-love – a charity and gratitude for all (people); when they have really learned to love their neighbours as themselves, they will be allowed to love themselves as their neighbours."

Screwtape really does know his 'enemy' well, doesn't he? He recognized the power of the kind of faith that inspires us to empty ourselves of all of our self-love, arrogance, conceit and superiority so that we may then be filled with the kind of love of others that Christ showed us on the cross.

Referring to that kind of self-emptying love, Paul wrote to the Philippians:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:5-8)

Friends, to be sure, we don't ever earn God's grace through our own humility. But by walking in humility, we can at least walk more closely to God, and in that walk, as Paul says, we can be transformed.

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What then does Paul mean when he writes that Christ will conform our bodies to the body of his glory? This is the Easter promise that lies at the end of our Lenten journey, for now, and then, on the other side of the grave for all of us, that because of Christ's glory, one day we can be glorified, too.

For now, though, we are the body of Christ. We are a colony of heaven, just as Paul called the Philippians to be. We are not the perfect colony, to be sure. But we are called to do our best. As our denomination's constitution states:

The church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity. (Book of Order G-3.0200)

Did you catch that word – “provisional.” We as the church are the place holder until Christ returns. We are to minister to the poor, the outcast and the oppressed, to fight for justice that brings the world more in line with the kingdom of God. What higher honor, what more challenging call can we ever receive in all of our lives?

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Friends, before closing, I want to be sure that you understand that the last thing we should do with this passage from Philippians is to reduce it to a quick-and-easy, two-step, wash-and-wear process. A short and shallow dip in the waters of humility will do us no more good than it will Tiger or Toyota. Nor will a lunging grab at glory on earth to try to achieve glory in heaven, as if we are reaching for the brass ring on a carousel.

That only separates us from God even more. In the end, after all it's not up to us. Paul makes it clear that it is Christ who will finally “transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.”

How then do we go forward in our Lenten walk of repentance and self-realization? How do we respond to the promise - that we, even you and me, will be transformed and conformed in Christ?

Perhaps it is a matter of both apologies and apologetics.

In her book [Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith](#), Kathleen Norris tells of working in a parochial school, helping children express their emotions through poetry. She writes:

Once a little boy wrote a poem called “The Monster Who Was Sorry.” He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in

the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: “Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, “I shouldn’t have done that.”

(Norris continues): “My messy house” says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell. ¹

Church, we’ve all got our own messy houses, don’t we, cluttered with bent or broken relationships, guilty consciences, bad habits, self-indulgences and mistaken understandings of others’ best intentions? So, like the boy, let us apologize and repent.

Then, as Paul instructs the Philippians, let us “stand firm” in our faith, let us “press on” and “hold fast to what we have attained”, so that our lives are themselves apologetics, our confident demonstration of the faith that has claimed us. Amen.

¹ Pp. 69-70