

“Christ Makes Us More”

A sermon based on the texts for Easter 3 C
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
On Sunday, May 5th, 2019
By David Oliver-Holder

One scholar of preaching has written that on any given Sunday, some of those gathered for worship almost didn't go, not because they had another option, nor because family or friends were in town, and it can just be so hard to get everyone corralled for church. The scholar has the sense that some almost don't go to church because they just don't feel good enough, worthy enough, they don't feel spiritual enough to participate meaningfully in worship.

Maybe a huge personal compromise was made in one's ideals. Maybe their temper was lost and words were said, and now they have to live with the embarrassing consequences. Maybe a realization has set in that they just haven't made very much real progress in life.

So why go to church and be reminded, or confronted with the ways that we all so consistently fall short? Because you might be here on a Sunday like today, and hear scriptures like the ones we have heard today, which show us that forgiveness is real. Transformation genuinely is possible. Reconciliation actually happens. “We are more than the worst thing we have ever done. We are greater than the sum of our mistakes and misdeeds.”ⁱ

II

It was game six of the World Series. His team found themselves up 3 games to 2, against a very heavily favored opponent. The game went into extra innings. In the top of the 10th inning, his team scored two runs to take the lead. Since he was not 100 % healthy, the team manager had taken him out early in games 1, 2 and 5, so that a strong defensive player could cover his position in the final innings of each of those games. But not in this game. Maybe because the manager thought his team had the game in hand, and he wanted his starter to finish what could be the series winning game, John McNamara chose to have his first baseman, Bill Buckner, remain in the game and take the field for the bottom of the 10th inning.

The New York Mets tied the game with three successive two-out singles off of Calvin Shiraldi and a wild pitch by Bob Stanley. No one much remembers all of that. The batter Bob Stanley was brought in to face was Mookie Wilson. Stanley worked to get Wilson on the verge of a strike out, but Wilson battled valiantly, fouling off several pitches. The wild pitch to Wilson allowed the tying run to score from third.

Wilson finally hit a slow roller down the first base line. First baseman Buckner knew that Wilson was fast, and in his rush to glove the ball and get it to Stanley who was running to cover the base, he misjudged the ball, which entirely missed his glove, rolled between his legs, and out into right field. The Mets Ray Knight, who was on second base, was able to score the winning game winning run.

And that is what baseball fans remember of that game. Not the three hits off of Shiraldi. Not the wild pitch by Bob Stanley that allowed the tying run to score. They remember Bill Buckner's error that ended the game.

That was on October 25th, 1986, and the Boston Red Sox had not won the World Series since 1918, the year before Babe Ruth was sold to the New York Yankees, causing what Boston fans came to call the Curse of the Bambino. There they were, on the verge of ending the curse, but because of Buckner's error, there was a game seven, which the Mets also won, winning the series, and continuing the curse.

Buckner became the scapegoat for so many frustrated fans in Boston. He actually began receiving death threats. He was booed and heckled by some of the fans at games in Boston. On the road during away games, he was the focus of ridicule, especially at the first spring training game against the Mets, and even the first regular season game in New York against the Yankees. Maybe mercifully, he was released by the Red Sox on July 23rd, 1987.

For the next two and a half seasons, he played for the California Angels, and the Kansas City Royals. His career wound down honorably. He remained a fine hitter, but thanks to the media, and their constant reminders of his error, those last years were pretty horrible.

Wonder of wonders, as a free agent in 1990, Buckner was signed by the Red Sox for another season. At the home opener on April 9th, 1990, he received a standing ovation as he took the field. He retired later that season on June 5th.

Well, as you may remember, the Red Sox finally broke the curse by winning the World Series 17 years later in 2007. At the home opener in Boston the next season, Buckner threw out the first pitch as the 2007 World Series championship banner was unfurled. After taking the field and standing on the mound, Buckner was welcomed by a standing ovation that lasted more than 4 minutes.

Asked after the game if he had any hesitation about appearing, he said, "I really had to forgive, not the fans of Boston, per se, but I would have to say in my heart I had to forgive the media for what they put me and my family through. So, you know, I've done that and I'm over that."

III

Forgiveness is real. Transformation genuinely is possible. Reconciliation actually happens. "We are more than the worst thing we have ever done. We are greater than the sum of our mistakes and misdeeds.

Who could have anticipated that Saul of Tarsus could have become Paul the Apostle? A fire-brand of an Israelite, fully confident, righteously arrogant, about his national identity: a Hebrew, a Jew, a Son of Abraham; and even more specifically: a member of the tribe of Benjamin; about his education: a Pharisee, well-schooled, religiously pure. No one came more pure, religiously and ethnically, than Saul.

Out of that overweening confidence and arrogance, he persecuted the unfaithful, and he thought God wanted him to do so. The first time we meet him is in Acts 7, at the stoning of Stephen. From that event, Saul hounded the Christians, earning the reputation that gave Ananias pause.

Could Saul be transformed by the work of God? Ananias had grave doubts, and hesitated in going to see him. Such a transformation just doesn't seem possible.

Then there is Peter. We know his story well. One of the first to be called by Jesus, brother of Andrew. One who said to Jesus in his boat that day, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Hard-headed, impetuous, yes, but also humble. Simon, his given name, would become better known by his nickname, Cephas, Rock, someone solid and steady, and on him, Jesus said, the Church would be built.

But then came that last night. The strange way the Passover meal was celebrated, that Last Supper, the other things Jesus did, the things he said. The praying

in the Garden of Gethsemane, the sleeping, the soldiers, the arrest, the running away. There was the lingering in the courtyard outside as Jesus was tried, and the question he was asked three times: "Say, you were one of his disciples, weren't you?" Each time Simon answered with rising insistence, "I am not." Later that morning, watching as Jesus was crucified.

After the rooster crowed that third time, after watching Jesus die, do you think Peter imagined there would ever be forgiveness for him? After such an awful failure, could he be reconciled? Could he be transformed once more into the friend of Jesus?

Of course we have the benefit of knowing how these stories unfolded. And good for them, we might think. But what about for us? What about such things happening in our day? Do we believe such forgiveness, such reconciliation, such transformation is possible in our day, in this place?

"These kinds of radical transformations feel utterly impossible to us. We are so polarized, so certain of our own rightness and therefore our own righteousness, so quick to assume the worst in whoever we deem "other," that it is the stories of Saul and Peter, and so many other biblical extreme makeovers, that we think idle, foolish tales. But to believe in the power of the resurrection is to also believe that through the grace of God Saul can become Paul and Simon can be turned into Peter.

That's a radical notion in our current climate."ⁱⁱ But that is the good news for today. Yes, such forgiveness, such reconciliation, such transformation, is always the work and the gift of God. "However, it is our role to concede that God has that power and the will to make of us more than the worst thing we've ever done, greater than the sum of our mistakes;...It is our role, when God calls us to do so, to be Ananias, that person who bridges the gap between past lives and current character and behavior. It is our role to trust that God can remove the scales not only from others' eyes but from ours, too."ⁱⁱⁱ

Do you see? These marvelous things that God does, things like forgiving and reconciling and transforming, these things are never done just for us, because we are somehow special. What God does for us we can never keep only to ourselves.

God does these things for a purpose: to put us to work in playing our part in joining with God in this mystical, amazing business of redemption. God has taken a risk

on each one of us. Our response, the way that we show our gratitude, is by then taking such risks on others.

I assure you, each one of us is here because someone took a risk on our behalf. And who knows, maybe you might be that next Rock, the next solid, dependable stone, in the Church's foundation. Maybe you might be the next one who writes letters, or just words, in whatever form, that God will then use to speak to someone else, who might, for the first time, hear that God's forgiveness, and reconciliation and transformation, is strong enough, even for them. They might come to understand, for the first time that we are more than the worst thing we have ever done. We are greater than the sum of our mistakes and misdeeds.

IV

A group of Christians in Le Chambon in south-central France gave excellent testimony to this in their faithful witness.^{iv} The day after France surrendered to Nazi Germany, June 18th, 1940, Pastor Andre Trocme spoke from his pulpit, "The responsibility of Christians is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences through the weapons of the spirit."

Over the next four years the little congregation lived out a dramatic script. Their resistance to Nazi violence took the form of hiding and sheltering thousands of Jewish refugees, a risky, costly action of love.

Years later, when someone would compliment or congratulate them for what they had done, the believers could only shrug, as if to say, "We only did what was natural." It looked natural because they took to heart the truth of these stories that we have heard read for us this morning. They remembered the risk that Jesus took with Peter. They remembered the risk that Jesus took with Saul. They knew the risk that Jesus had taken with them. And so they took a great risk for others, some of whom were neighbors, no doubt, but most were strangers.

People of God, we are what Christ has made us, and this great, good news is especially for you, for you who are not entirely sure you should even be here. It is for you, so that you might be for others. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Jill Duffield, "Third Sunday of Easter," from her blog, *Looking into the Lectionary* for April 10th, 2016, on the website for the Presbyterian Outlook.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Thanks to Jim McCoy for this story in his, "When the Wars Are Done," a blog post for the third Sunday of Easter on the *Ekklesia Project* website, April 8th, 2016.