

“I’m Sorry, But...”

Isaiah 58:1-12

Scott Huie

Westminster Presbyterian Church

February 17, 2010 Ash Wednesday

A couple of weeks ago as I was flipping through the TV channels with my remote, I suddenly came across retired baseball homerun slugger Mark McGuire sitting face to face with Bob Costas in a one on one interview. With tears in his eyes, Mark confessed what most everyone figured to be true: he had used steroids for much of his baseball life. Finally after years of denial and even stonewalling before a congressional panel, Mark made a u-turn, confessed his sin, said he was sorry to his family, to his fans, and to Major League Baseball. He seemed sincere. It was a touching moment.

But the next day on *Sports Center* on ESPN, I heard the report that Mark had come clean right at the point “coincidentally” when the St. Louis Cardinals were ready to hire Mark as a hitting coach for the coming year. Speculation was that he needed to come clean, confess, and set the record straight publicly in order to get the job. But let’s still give him the benefit of the doubt, Mark McGuire repented of his sins, but there is no question it was calculated repentance. “I’m sorry, but...I really want this job.”

Another sports figure, once widely revered for his athletic prowess and whose jersey I used to wear with great pride has been making the rounds lately on sports talk radio. Michael Vick has expressed deep remorse for his involvement in dog fighting. He has paid a mighty price. He has said the right things, and I hate to be cynical—hey, I still have that jersey—but I wonder, how sorry is he really? Is his repentance sincere, or is it calculated, a PR attempt to get back into the public’s good graces and land another fat contract to be an NFL quarterback. “I’m sorry, but...I really want back in the NFL.”

From sports to politics we go, and I think of folks like South Carolina governor Mark Sanford and former US senator and presidential candidate John Edwards. Both were involved in sordid tales of adultery. Their unfaithfulness spawned countless lies and cover-ups and in one case an illegitimate child. They both confessed before the world and laid their hearts open. Only God truly know their hearts, but was their motivation, “I’m sorry.” Or was it, “I’m sorry, but...”?

From sports and politics to entertainment, “John and Cate Plus 8” soon became just “Cate Plus 8” as their failing marriage and divorce became a front page lead story. There were accusations, again cover-ups, and even some emotional confessions, and in the end television ratings went through the roof. “I’m sorry...but hey, our advertisers love us.”

Hip hopper Kanye West had his moment in the sun recently after rudely taking the microphone from Taylor Swift during her live acceptance speech on the Video Music Awards and saying that someone besides Swift, Beyonce, was more deserving of the award. Kanye was pilloried by just about everyone such that his career was in jeopardy. So he went on the *Jay Leno Show* and confessed his transgression, again with tears in his eyes. It made for great TV. Was it sincere, or was it calculated, a desperate attempt to win back consumers, who would or perhaps would not buy his CDs and concert tickets anymore? Was it, “I’m sorry.” Or was it, “I’m sorry, but I have a concert tour coming up”?

I am not sure why exactly, but we the public seem to just eat up all these public confessions by famous and infamous people. Maybe it makes us feel a little better about ourselves when we see the glamorous struggle so. We find it strangely cathartic.

The more I think about it, however, these celebrities aren’t the only ones looking for—shall I say—cheap redemption. As I analyze my own life, so I often I find myself saying or at least thinking, “Yes, I’m sorry, but.” But...I’m not the only one at fault here. But...you shouldn’t feel that way simply because of my actions. But...I’m uncomfortable talking about this and just want to move on and end the discussion. But...you should be apologizing to me as well. But, but, but. So often I find myself qualifying my repentance and putting on conditions. It becomes very calculated, in effect, minimizing the impact my actions have on others. Perhaps I am not the only one here who sometimes says, “I’m sorry, but...” or even, “I’m sorry, if...”

Simply put, the calculated ten-minute redemption might work for a quick fix; it might even be profitable for some. However, the bottom line is, it doesn’t satisfy God. We see that going back to the Old Testament.

The Israelites in Isaiah’s day had some serious issues. They were living in exile, banished from the Promised Land. And they were abusing workers, resorting to violence, allowing the hungry to go without food, allowing the unclothed to remain naked, ignoring relatives in need. Generally speaking, they were supporting

injustice through inaction—they weren't doing squat—while at the same time going through the motions of faith and worship, and then wondering why there was no restoration—why they as God's special, chosen people were still living in exile. They performed the rituals of faith, but only because they thought that doing so would cause God to help them. But their hearts weren't into it. They wanted redemption—to be forgiven and restored—but only because they thought it would be profitable to them.

Does that sound familiar? You see, redemption for them, as with us, can so easily become a tool, a means to an end. As with us, the Israelites wanted to feel good about themselves without doing the real work. I am not sure if our ten minutes to redemption is all that different from theirs. I suspect our hunch is that often when folks apologize, especially the glamorous, they don't really mean it. It's too painless and too quick. It's a fast way to get out of trouble and get on with life, and maybe even land a book deal.

The Israelite version of redemption was not about going on TV. Rather it involved sackcloth and ashes and fasting. But the reality was, it was all for show apparently. It never changed their behavior, and they wondered why God could be so angry with them. As Isaiah said, "You (Israelites) wonder why the Lord pays no attention when you go without eating and act humble. But on those same days that you give up eating, you think only of yourselves and abuse your workers." In other words, people, your worship—or your actions—betray your words. You don't care about real justice and real reform. All that matters to you is, "What's in it for me?"

God had no use for their sackcloth and ashes, their false humility, their fighting and quarreling. What God wanted was real repentance, real reform, real change. Not the flash, but the substance. If the people truly wanted restoration, there would be a price to pay.

What God was looking for, and what God *is* looking for, is not "I'm sorry, but..." God is looking for, "I'm sorry. Period. I'm sorry, and I'm going to change. I am going to change, not because it will bring back to glory days of Israel or get me a book deal or sports contract. I am going to change because it is the right thing to do. I am going to change because it is what God wants. I am sorry and I mean it."

God told the Israelites precisely what to do: when you leave the sanctuary, make sure your worship leads to action. Set falsely convicted prisoners free. House the homeless. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Be nice to your mother-in-law.

These are the acts of faith of those who have hearts only for God. Do these things, Isaiah says, and the Lord will always guide you and provide good things to eat when you are in the desert. God will make you healthy. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water or like a stream that never runs dry. Do these things and life will be good.

You may be liar, cheater, or stealer. You may be a pedophile, assassin, or adulterer. Your sins may be big. Your sins may be small. Either way, to be restored, to be forgiven, we must make amends. We must turn around. Starting today, the season of Lent is a great time to begin.

So, my friends, let's not stay glued to the television waiting with anticipation how Tiger Woods is going to respond to his recent fall from grace. Rather, let us look within ourselves and let us look to God, knowing that real forgiveness and restoration go hand in hand when there is real repentance. It's inevitable: holy worship leads to holy living.

"We're sorry, but..." No, "We sorry, period, God." Now is the time for a fresh beginning.

Liturgy for WPC Worship: Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010
Scott Huie

Prelude

*Call to Worship

Welcome to a season of self-examination;
 this is a time for reconciliation with God and neighbor.

***Welcome together, elders and children, to meet God,
 longing for the abundant mercy of our Creator.***

Seek to know God's presence here and everywhere;
 let the wisdom of God guide you in truth.

***Through hardship, affliction, and calamity,
 we reach for the power of God to steady us.***

Prepare yourselves for a period of testing.

Be open to the grace that enables your growth.

***With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning,
 we seek the steadfast love of God.***

*Invocation

*Opening Hymn #51 "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"

Prayer of Confession

Help us, awesome God, to be honest with ourselves and with you. We want to change our wasteful, destructive ways. We want to be rid of the evil that weighs us down, the guilt that crushes our spirits. Have mercy on us as we remember and confess our sin in these moments of silent struggle. Purge us of all the garbage from our past. Wash us in the flowing streams of your forgiving love. Create in us clean hearts, O God, and fill our lives with a new and right spirit. Sustain our hearts day by day in renewed focus on your steadfast love... (Our prayer continues in silence). Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Children's Sermon

Nicole Lock

Anthem

"O the Deep, Deep, Love of Jesus"
 Soloist Donna Carter

Thomas Williams

Scripture Reading Isaiah 58:1-12

Sermon “I’m Sorry, But...” Scott Huie

Invitation to the Observance of the Lenten Discipline

Litany of Penitence

Leader: We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Men: Have mercy on us, O God—

Women: according to your steadfast love; according to your mercy—

Men: blot out our transgressions.

Leader: We are dust—

Men: Finite and fixed, human, incomplete, fixed to this earthly home.

Women: Breathe life into our lungs of clay; let us sing your heavenly praise.

Leader: We are wounded

Men: Broken and battered, guilty, spoiled, veiled by the shadows of sin.

Women: Wash our wounds, cleanse our hearts, bind up our brokenness.

Men: You have the power to do it, and the love to desire it.

Leader: We cry for help—

Men: Desperate and distressed, aimless, anxious in our own limitations.

Women: Make us radiant with your love, confident in your goodness.

Men: We are hands and feet for a lonely world.

Leader: We are voice and song for a silent world.

Women: We are heart and gift for a needy world.

Leader: All through Christ...

Women: Only through Christ...

Men: Even through Christ.

Imposition of Ashes

Anthem Psalm 51 Soloist Donna Carter David Clark Isele

Congregational response is: “The sacrifice You accept, O God, is a humble spirit.”

*Closing Hymn #204 “Rock of Ages”

*Benediction

(please depart in silence)