

“Lent: A Time to Work Out Our Salvation”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 22, 2009

Fourth Sunday of Lent
Rev. John Wahl

Numbers 20:1-8
Ephesians 2:1-10

Last Sunday afternoon, as I was driving down I-71 toward Louisville, I finished my book on tape and began searching for a radio station. It was getting to be evening, and I knew that it would not be long before the announcement would be made. After all, last Sunday was “Selection Sunday.”

For those of you who are not rabid college basketball enthusiasts or were not born in the state of Kentucky, or both, “Selection Sunday” is the day when the men’s NCAA basketball tournament pairings are announced. This year, speculation was running high that the University of Louisville Cardinals were poised to receive a number one seed. They had recently won the regular season and conference tournament titles in the Big East – known to be the toughest conference in the nation this year.

For a while, the stations faded in and out and while driving through Cincinnati, there was no local coverage – only the national ESPN news – so I was glad to get within range of the University of Louisville’s home station before the announcement was made. Then I heard it. Not only did the Cardinals get one of the four regional number one seeds, but the number one overall seed. They would be playing the first two rounds in Dayton – practically a home game unless they happened to face Ohio State in the second round (oops, that did not work out in the Buckeye’s favor).

So while the talk during my conference in Louisville was all about being church and doing church and leading a church, the conversation around town was squarely set on basketball. March Madness was raging rampant. In addition to the hype over the number one seeded men’s team, the University of Louisville women’s team had earned a number three seed in their NCAA tournament, their highest ever.

Furthermore, the girl’s state high school basketball tournament has just finished and the boy’s state tournament was about to begin. In other parts of the country, this may not be a big deal, but Kentucky is one of only two states that still have one tournament for all high schools – large or small. Each year, it is like “Hoosiers” waiting to happen, where a small school from the “sticks” might come in and win the crown against all odds. This year, that underdog squad is Elliot County – a school in Appalachia with 312 kids enrolled in the whole school and four seniors who had started varsity together since the 8th grade. As of last night, they had won two games and made it to the semi-finals, and were still alive to pull off a miracle.

In the midst of all this hoops hysteria, I caught sight Wednesday morning in the local paper a story about the Bellarmine Knights. Bellarmine is a Catholic college also located in Louisville with about 1200 students. They play basketball in Division II and in a gym that – with a capacity of 1800 – is smaller than several local high schools. Never in the history of the

men's basketball program had they made it to the Division II playoffs, but this year's squad went 26 – 6 and last Tuesday hosted a Sweet 16 game against the top-ranked and undefeated team from Findlay, Ohio.

Bellarmino played its heart out, they shot 57 percent and the game went into overtime. Down by three points, one of the Knights pulled up for a long jumper that swished through the net with only 3.2 seconds left. The referee closest to the play raised his arms and called it a three, but the other official rushed over and, after conferring, the call was changed; the shooter's foot was on the line; it was a two-pointer and Bellarmino still trailed by one. Findlay threw the ball in and avoided a foul meaning the game was over, Findlay was headed to the Elite 8 and Bellarmino's season was finished.

After the game, while speaking to the media, Bellarmino's frustrated coach talked about how there should have been a monitor courtside for the officials to watch the replay of the final shot and what a shame it was that the outcome of the game was determined because it was not there. Mind you, this game was being played on their home court; and yet, the coach thought: first, that someone else should have thought about the monitor; and second, that having it would have saved his team's season.

This got me thinking, which – and maybe this is true for you, too – can sometimes be a dangerous thing. Now, I realize that while it is useful only to carry analogies so far, I began to recognize in this coach's reaction something I have also seen in the church. It reveals an attitude that if only things were different, then the church – sometimes a whole denomination but usually a local congregation – then the church would be “better,” or in relation to this coach's analogy, have a better chance for success.

I think that his identification of the video monitor as his team's root problem caught my attention because I often hear it said that the only churches that can thrive and survive these days are those that have video screens in worship; usually in combination with “contemporary” music. When churches make these investments and changes, they grow like gangbusters and everyone is happy. But, this claim is made without factual basis and, more importantly, without any true ownership on the part of those who say it.

Statistics show that not all growing churches have “contemporary” worship. Not all are independent. Not all are large. Some are progressive, some are conservative. In the past few years, many large “mega-churches” have been on the decline. In other words, there is no set formula – to which churches “succeed.”

In comparison to the big, Division I, super-hyped NCAA tournament, with sellout crowds, TV coverage and even President Obama taking time to fill out a bracket; when compared to that, the Division II tournament – with its small crowds, page six newspaper coverage and lack of courtside monitors – can seem to us like an inferior product. How can bigger, more lucrative, more influential, and more technically equipped not seem to be “better?”

One of the things that struck home during the conference on “New Ways of Being Church” that I attended last week was how often we try to fit our churches into the molds that

have been cast by our culture. And yet, the culture is changing so rapidly that it is nearly impossible – if even desirable – to remain “contemporary” with today’s society.

Brian McClaren, a pastor / writer and a speaker at the conference sought to remind us that today’s church is in the midst of a “hurricane of change.” But, there are signs of hope, he said, “for out of this stormy period is emerging a new and more authentic kind of Christianity.”¹

In fact, as we learned, authenticity is what faith seekers crave most from a church. They want to find a community where their doubts and questions are accepted, where the members befriend them not out of obligation or to increase the membership rolls, but out of genuine love. A truly authentic church does not seek to be “contemporary” because it is the latest or greatest, but instead seeks to claim its heritage and creatively translate its tradition into modern-day, meaningful practices.

Religious sociologist Diana Butler Bass added that: “figures show a decline of interest in parties and labels. People don’t even like the label *Christian* anymore and they are increasingly put off by all the competing subgroups within denominations. Therefore, Christians need to come up with new language to describe themselves: language that carries the deepest sense of our passion to the world, so those who are busy rejecting us might give us another hearing.”²

In reading this passage from chapter two of Ephesians, some of its language may not be familiar to all people. In these verses, evil is represented not as an abstraction, but as living forces that seek dominion over human lives. This is the “ruler of the power of the air” (v. 2) which works among those who are disobedient. And yet, through the grace of God, we have already been saved from these evil forces – those around us and maybe even within us – and raised up to be seated with God in heaven.

Hold on a minute, we might think, doesn’t heaven come later? Most days, it still seems like we’re still here on earth, that poverty and addictions and hatred still surround us. How, then, can the author of Ephesians claim that if we are saved, we are in heaven with God? But, the heavenly place is not a place at all – at least not a single place that you can limit by space or time. This passage is about our relationship with God which, based on his grace and mercy, is a relationship which has been made possible so that we might ascend beyond things like “the passions of the flesh” (v. 3) and instead live in right relationship with God and with each other.

Ignatius of Loyola wrote: “the love which moves me has to descend from above, from the love of God.”³ In these final verses, we find one of the greatest claims of our reformed tradition – that of being saved through faith, not by our doing, but as a gift from God. Therefore, any and all “good works” – if they are to be truly good and pure in the eyes of God – must be performed in thankful response to the salvation granted to us.

And yet, we have a hard time believing that faith is God’s gift to us. Many will try to earn their salvation, to accumulate enough good works that it becomes deserved. Many others

¹ As quoted by Eva Stimson, “Eye of the Hurricane,” *Presbyterian News Service*

² Eva Stimson.

³ *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8

will try to ensure they have enough faith; regimenting themselves to pray or worship or study so that they might increase their faith.

And so, many in the church remain anxious – including, often times, myself – wondering if we have done enough, whether we have tried hard enough, whether we have devoted ourselves sufficiently for God to look favorably upon us. The result is that the church often changes for the wrong reasons: to be more attractive to the world, to give the impression that we are more pious than others, or work harder, or are the most up-to-date. And then, when we realize we are not, we – like the small-college coach whose team lost the game – tend to blame it on a lack of resources, or a society that seems uninterested in church, or that no longer reserves Sunday mornings for church activities.

What is there to work out about our salvation? Should we exercise our faith in worship and music, through prayer and study? Should we do good works in thankful response to the grace that God has shown us and in obedience to Christ’s commands that we should follow in his way? Should we seek to translate the faith and create a church community that welcomes strangers and seeks to share the good news? Absolutely. There is much to be done.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God...For we are what God has made us, created in Jesus Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (v. 8-10) Thanks be to God for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.