

April 3, 2016

Moscow First Presbyterian Church
"A Sermon on the Mound"
Bruce Pitman

Jeremiah 31: 33-35
Matthew 26: 17-30
Hebrews 4:14-16

Today, we come to the table for communion. We have made our journey through Lent, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and then Easter. Each step on this journey was helping us define our relationship with the Risen Lord. On Good Friday, we were given the gift of forgiveness as our sins were taken to the cross. On Easter, we were given the promise of everlasting life and the gift of unconditional love and grace.

The Sunday after Easter, we frequently preach about the encounters with the risen Christ that provided proof of the resurrection. We tell about the meeting on the Road to Emmaus, or Jesus having a meal with his disciples, or Jesus' encounter with Thomas who needed more evidence. How do you see yourself in these stories? In the week after Easter, where do you put yourself in the story of Thomas or on the Road to Emmaus? What have your encounters with God been like this week? Did you smell the sweet fragrance on the flowers that we put on the cross, or was it less joyful?

Today, we will have our own encounter with the Risen Lord, with Christ, at the communion table. We may need to come to this communion with a spirit of contrition and the need for forgiveness. AND we may also come to the table with a full heart in celebration of the gift of grace and the promise of salvation. In either situation, along with Thomas, Mary, the disciples, we will have our own encounter with the Risen Lord.

Today, I will invite you to the ball park to begin your preparation for communion. While I think that more sermons should include references to baseball, I will apologize in advance to those who don't care about baseball. Today is opening day. This is a big deal for baseball fans...even for ever-suffering fans of bad clubs. For committed fans, Opening Day brings an irrational hope for a better than 500 season that can be enjoyed for a few weeks... until our players reveal their true talent. In our family, baseball is so important that our children are relieved when baseball season ends so that they can have their mother back.....So here is a sermon on the mound....

It was another great day for baseball, as the average Detroit Tigers were playing the below average Cleveland Indians in Detroit on June 2, 2010. The opposing pitchers were barely having average seasons. This was not going to be a game for the ages, it was a game to just enjoy the crack of the bat, have cold beverage and eat a hot dog....close to a perfect day for some... BUT..by the 7th and 8th innings the fans were becoming restless and the players for Detroit were becoming edgy. They were sensing that something very unusual was taking place on the field. By the 8th inning, everyone in the ballpark knew that the Detroit pitcher, Armando Galarraga, was on the brink of throwing a perfect game. He had faced 24 batters and there had been 24 outs. For those who don't care about baseball....a perfect game is when 27 batters take their turn at batting and all 27 are put out...and no batter gets to first base.

So, Galarraga goes to the mound in the top of the 9th inning and the stadium is silent. He has three batters to face. His teammates don't want to talk to him and they certainly don't want the ball hit to them...because they do not want to make a mistake that might cause their pitcher to lose a chance at a perfect game. There had only been 20 perfect games thrown in all of major leagues baseball history.

He faces batter number (25) and it is a quick and easy out and the same with batter number 26. The 27th and potentially last batter, Jason Donald, comes to the plate and hits the ball hard but it is fielded well. Everyone in the park sees that the ball arrived at first base in plenty of time to get the runner out...and for a split second everyone thought they had just witnessed baseball history...a perfect game...until the umpire Jim Joyce instead calls Jason Donald safe at first base and ends the possibility of a perfect game. Everyone in the ball park knows that the umpire had made a huge mistake and that Armando had been robbed of a once in a life-time opportunity for a perfect game. Everyone is stunned and the Detroit fans and teammates explode in anger. Then Armando surprises everyone...he doesn't throw a tantrum or display anger at the bad call. Instead, he gracefully went to the mound and gets batter number 28 out and Detroit wins the game. After the game, he did not embarrass Jim Joyce with a post game rant with the media or create a confrontation with Joyce. He does not join in the outrage that fans and teammates expressed. He just displayed incredible and unexpected grace.

Later that day, umpire Jim Joyce reviews the game tape and realizes that he made a terrible mistake and that his mistake had cost Galarraga his chance at a perfect game. Joyce was devastated by this mistake. He picked up the phone and called Galarraga to apologize. Galarraga gracefully accepted Joyce's apology and said...thanks for calling and hung up the phone. Grace and forgiveness in a simple call.

The next day, before the game each team presented umpire Jim Joyce with their line-up cards amid a chorus of boosthe Detroit fans were still mad about the blown call. Traditionally, the manager of the team gives the starting line-up card to the home plate umpire. To everyone's surprise, instead of the Detroit manger bringing the line-up card to the umpire, Galarraga came out of the Detroit dugout with the Detroit line-up card to give to Jim Joyce. The stadium became quiet when the two met at home plate. Galarraga gave the line-up card to Jim Joyce and they shook hands and then Galarraga gave Joyce a small hug ...and Joyce bowed his head in tears. The boos quickly became cheers.

The sermon on the mound that day was about grace, forgiveness, and the courage to ask for forgiveness.

You may dismiss this story because it is just about a game, but this story is not really about baseball. It is a story about two people who encountered each other at the "almost dream come true moment" of a person's career. Their reputations are on the line in full view of thousands of people. Their acts of grace, forgiveness, and humility were lessons more valuable than a perfect game on a very public stage.

This story was not really about baseball...

Amazing grace. Unearned loveunconditional love. It is remarkably hard to understand and accept unconditional grace given to us from others and from God. We can't buy it or earn it. It is the

love of God that comes from his gift of Jesus Christ. It is his love that comes to us each day...even when we don't ask for it. It is a stream of cool pure water that we can drink from that restores our soul. John Ortberg, in the series *Soul Keeping*, talks about this love being given to us and then channeled through us to others. We love because he first loved us.

A few weeks ago, I was driving the Family Promise van and taking two families from the Day Center in Moscow to the host congregation in Pullman. I overheard the following conversation. One guest said to the other, "until a few weeks ago, I had forgotten what unconditional kindness feels like. I was so used to being scammed, used and taken advantage of." She went on to say that it was difficult to accept that these volunteers in Family Promise were doing all this work because they really cared and didn't expect anything in return. She was receiving unconditional love and it was changing her life. She was feeling loved because he first loved us. Amazing grace.

Today, we prepare ourselves for a special encounter with our Lord and savior as we come to the Communion table. We each must approach the table with humility and awe. We must prepare our hearts for an honest encounter with our Lord. When we come to the table, we will celebrate the grace and everlasting life that comes from the empty tomb.

We also come to the table in awe of the incredible gift of the cross. Our sins were taken to the cross. Jesus did not take HIS sins to the cross...he took ours. How was that possible? Today, we come to the table as forgiven people...not perfect people. We don't have the chance to pitch a perfect game. BUT we are required to forgive others as we are forgiven.

How do we prepare ourselves for this moment of communion? Our moment of communion may be a celebration of HIS great gifts or it may be a moment of humble honesty with our Lord. In few minutes, we will stand in line to receive the elements with others of this faith community, but it is really a most personal moment with God.

Do we have sins that we need to be forgiven...that need to be brought to the table?

Do we need to pray for courage to even ask for forgiveness?

Do we need to forgive someone....or to forgive ourselves so that we can live fully in God's grace?

Have we caused harm and need to seek forgiveness?

Is there a situation that has caused God to cry or grieve ...where we could've made a difference but failed to act?

Let us prepare ourselves to encounter Jesus Christ at this communion table and affirm the promise of Easter.

Come to the table today to celebrate and remember the sweet fragrance of our Easter flowers that we put on the cross last week. Come to the table also celebrating the grace we have been given and that our sins are forgiven. Amen.