

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
June 27, 2010

I Corinthians 1:26-31

“News from Pittsburgh: Someone to Fall Back On”

It's been a quiet week in Pittsburgh, my new hometown. Summer arrived, gardens were planted; a couple rainstorms passed through without too much water in our basements. Most of the world has been focused on major sporting events like Wimbledon or the World Cup, but we here in Pittsburgh managed to keep the nation's attention riveted on our little corner of the globe by, well, publicly firing a giant pierogi. Andrew Kurtz is the man at the center of Pierogi-Gate, a major news event picked up by CBS, ESPN, and Fox Sports. When Mr. Kurtz made some disparaging remarks on Facebook concerning the decision to renew the contracts of the Pirates' General Manager and Team Manager, he moved, as it were, from the frying pan into the fire. He has since been re-hired, but not before revealing some unsettling team secrets, such as the fact that the people hired to run as pierogis routinely alternate costumes. So if you are an avid Cheese Chester supporter, that runner may actually be inside the Sauerkraut Saul costume for the next night's game. I'm not so sure it was wise to re-hire Mr. Kurtz. He admitted that he likes running as Jalapeño Hannah because you get to carry a purse and (quote) “you can whack the other pierogis with it” (unquote).

It's also been an interesting week in terms of people making public apologies. David Cameron, the new prime minister of England made a historic apology, expressing regret over the 1972 shooting death of 14 Catholic protesters in Northern Ireland by British, Protestant soldiers; and a few days ago, Gen. McChrystal apologized to President Obama for ill-chosen words and actions, prior to being replaced by Gen. Petraeus. And of course, British Petroleum officials continue to apologize for the horrific oil rig disaster that claimed 11 lives and oil spill that has been pumping up to 60,000 barrels a day into the Gulf waters for over a month. Fortunately, BP has a thick file of apologies from which to draw upon when writing current press releases: apologies for dumping chemical waste from 1993-95 on Endicott Island, Alaska; apologies for the Texas City oil refinery explosion in 2005 that killed 15 and injured 180 people; an apology for spilling oil near Prudhoe Bay, Alaska in August 2006, May 2007, and October 2007; apologies in 2007 while paying a \$300 million fine for trying to manipulate the price of propane gas; and apologies for having two of their refineries in Texas and Ohio account for 97% of the safety violations detected by OSHA from 2007 to 2010. Part of BP executive Tony Hayward's apology consisted of his plea that he would like to get his life back, a comment made shortly before he was spotted enjoying a yacht race off the coast of the Isle of Wight. Mr. Hayward enjoyed the race because it took place in one of the few patches of ocean not polluted by BP.

For Walter Johannsen, apologies had been much on his mind of late. Walter and his wife divorced several years ago when his daughter, Julie, was near the end of her freshman year in high school. A few weeks ago, Julie finished her first year at State College and had decided to live with her father for the summer. In truth, over the past

years, they had not spent a lot of time together – periodic weekend overnights and day visits were about it. To Walter, now seemed like a good time to re-establish a father-daughter relationship, and perhaps to apologize for how the divorce affected Julie's life. But he struggled with deciding how to broach the topic with his daughter. When the decision was made to get divorced, there was the usual sequence of events: the two parents broke the news to their teenage daughter, stressing that the divorce wasn't about her but about them, and that they just couldn't be together any longer. Then came the awkward transition when Walter moved out, taking part of the home furnishing with him, court papers were signed making everything official, and alternating weekends spent by Julie in a guest room in Walter's severely under-decorated apartment across town. If Julie was very angry about the divorce, she didn't show it much – at least not to her father. The reality was that she had reached an age when she was already sharing little of her life with her dad, and the divorce seemed to make the silences longer and the gaps in communication even deeper.

Walter is an English professor and, to be honest, he was never cut out for bachelor life. His cooking skills involved leftovers and scary things found near the back of the refrigerator. To say he was an indifferent dresser was being polite. And he sincerely held to the misguided belief that since you were clean after your shower, the towel you used to dry off was only whisking away clean water and thus didn't need to be washed regularly. On her periodic visits, Julie would fuss at her dad to get him to maintain basic levels of hygiene and clothing fashion. It always drove her nuts that he'd buy the largest box of Cheerios since that was the best value, although it never fit in the kitchen cupboard so that the cupboard door was invariably partially open all the time. Julie also kept him humble. Once Walter hinted that after the divorce he had considered seeing a psychiatrist, but he was afraid the counselors would make him so normal and well-adjusted that he could never do any creative writing again. In response, Julie had stressed that "psychiatrists weren't nearly that good."¹

Despite being gifted with words, when it came to his daughter and his divorce, Walter had a severe case of writer's block. He felt that he had failed her and let her down. He knew he wasn't perfect; his ex-wife certainly knew he wasn't perfect – but as a father, you want to be perfect for your children: their knight in shining armor, their prince and protector. When they're afraid, you want to be the one whose hand they hold and who leads them out of the shadows into the light. You want to wipe away their tears, to be the one to check under the bed for monsters, knowing that your kiss or lullaby is what is needed to ensure a good night's sleep.

Walter wondered: How do you admit your failings to your child? Julie learned early on that he couldn't field grounders, that he danced like his feet were stuck in cement, and that he's got funny knees and should always wear long shorts in the summer. But that just makes him quirky without taking away his essential "Dad-ness." How could he mention his demons, his fears, his real mess-ups to his own daughter?

Walter had never been much of a churchgoer. He used to quote Kurt Vonnegut and claim that he practiced a disorganized religion, an unholy disorder known as "Our Lady

of Perpetual Consternation.”² But he went to church recently, and the minister had read from the letter to the Corinthians, where Paul reminds us that God did not choose many who were powerful or of noble birth, but instead chose the foolish in the world to shame the wise and the weak in the world to shame the strong, so that no one might boast in God’s presence (I Cor 1:27-29). For Paul, the key symbol of this intentional choice of the foolish over the worldly wise is the cross. This tool of violence, the wooden cross of crucifixion – a place of loss and failure, brokenness and death – this was where God’s wholly other wisdom was revealed for all time.³

The pastor said: Look, it wasn’t as if humans were going along their foolish ways and made a really bad decision that ended up with the innocent Son of God being killed by accident, so that God intervened and corrected that error by the resurrection on Easter Sunday. If that were true, God would be reduced to someone like an appliance repairman who comes by just to fix whatever is broken, or an elementary school teacher who steps into the classroom, sees a naughty word written on the chalkboard and erases it so that the offense is no longer visible. God is much more that. God saw, no, God felt the depth of pain that exists in the world. God in Christ was born, lived, hungered, worked, sweated and slept like us. And all the collective brokenness of life – the lepers and orphans, the women abused and widowed, the fathers made into soldiers or slaves – God intimately joined that grim reality through a shameful, painful act of being rejected, crucified, and publicly dying as a lowly criminal unworthy of a grave or a glance of pity. By God going to the cross, what was foolish became infused with a deep wisdom; what was weak became a place to find strength. What appeared to be a dead end became instead a place for us to travel to, to reflect upon, something that re-names our brokenness in new, life-giving words. “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Walter knew he struggled over how to offer an apology to his daughter because he knew how prone he was to using words as a shield for his emotions. He feared that once he said “I’m sorry” he would slip into language that tried to explain the divorce, that would seek to defend the logic of a painful act, that too quickly tried to erase the naughty word from the blackboard so that everyone could just get on with their life. But some things just can’t be erased.

Walter didn’t know if Julie would understand what he wanted to say, but he knew that before she moved further down her own life-path, he had to try to talk with her. Twice he caught her on the stairs or heading out the backdoor and commented that he’d like to sit down with her soon, to which she’d nodded but said she was in a rush right then. So late one evening before going to bed, while she was out on the town, Walter pulled out the cell phone he grudgingly carried around and managed to text his daughter (with only two misspelled words) to ask her if she was free for dinner the next night. A quick response “OK” came back just before he rolled over to go to sleep.

In hindsight, knowing how special and savvy Julie is, Walter shouldn’t have been surprised when he came downstairs the next morning. There on the kitchen table a

series of items had obviously been set up late the night before: a rose in a bud vase, a small, framed picture of Walter catching Julie as a child after tossing her in the air, a stack of his favorite books carefully pulled from his cluttered bookshelves – Slaughterhouse Five, Pilgrim at Tinker’s Creek, Thurber’s Fables, Frost’s poems – and then a letter folded and addressed simply to “Dad.”

Julie wrote these words: “I know you want to talk, and I’m pretty sure you want to talk about stuff like you and Mom and the divorce. And that’s okay – I think I’m ready for us to have this conversation. I wasn’t ready a few years ago. I kept myself busy to avoid thinking too much about what had happened to our home and the family I’d known all my life. The last few years I’ve been angry and depressed and confused. I wanted my old life back, yet I wanted you and Mom to finally be happy – only to come to realize that some of the things we want in life are mutually exclusive. And that can’t be helped.

While I’ve been at college, I’ve met a lot of people who’ve been through a lot, who’ve known pain in their life and who don’t know who they are or what they believe. That has helped me get things in perspective. Some friends saw a picture of you up on my dorm wall and asked me what you were like. I didn’t start by saying ‘That’s my Dad, who divorced my mom and moved out of the house.’ I didn’t talk about your work, your clothes, your funny habit of singing theme songs from old TV shows. But I did say that my favorite memory of you was when I would stand in the yard with my back to you and then I’d fall back, so you could catch me under the arms and spin me around in a circle. You never let me drop. I couldn’t see you or your face, but I knew you were there behind me.

Dad, you’ve never let me drop. I’m busy running forward, busy with things in front of my face. But I can go forward because I know you’re behind me – to clap for me, to listen to my stories, to catch me when I fall. Some of the most important things in life you don’t look at face to face – like God, like love – but you know they’re there, that they’re something you can trust, something you can fall back on. That’s what you mean to me. I’m looking forward to having dinner with you tonight.”

Walter was struck by how in a place of foolishness and weakness and frail human life, something this wonderful and wise could take root and blossom.

That’s the news from Pittsburgh – where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the Presbyterians are above average.

¹ Cf. Mark Vonnegut, intro., K. Vonnegut, *Armageddon in Retrospect*, p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ *Texts for Preaching*, I Corinthians 1:18-31, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, p. 124.