

LESSONS FROM THE FOOTBALL FIELD:
III – SOMETIMES YOU FUMBLE
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Genesis 3:1-20

Mark 14:66-72

I begin today by telling you something I've told you many times before. Part of the reason for the grey hair on my head is because I'm a Philadelphia sports fan. And it's a good thing I'm already completely grey because if I wasn't, this year's Phillies season would have done it, not to mention last Sunday night's Eagles' embarrassing show against the Cowboys.

I find it ironic that I designed this sermon series months ago, even picking the title back then as well – "Sometimes You Fumble" – and lo and behold, my beloved Eagles fumbled twice in the early minutes of Sunday's game which led to Dallas scoring both times, and it just got worse from there.

Oh friends, in football, as in life, things can go wrong. Players get hurt, penalty flags get thrown for all sorts of things, from off sides to holding to roughing the kicker and roughing the passer – the list goes on and on. Then there are balls

that are perfectly thrown but fly right through the hands of the receiver for an incomplete pass, and, worst case scenario, into the hands of a player for the other team for an interception. And then, of course, there are fumbles, where the ball gets away and there's a mad scramble for it by practically everyone on the field.

There are all sorts of ways for things to go wrong in the game of football, and all sorts of results when they do. Some mistakes keep a team from making a first down, some actually send them backwards, some take the ball away and give it to the other team, and some, sadly, cost them the game.

Let me tell you about a huge mistake in a football game that happened in the Rose Bowl of 1929. It happened to a player for the University of California at Berkeley whose name was Roy Riegels – and what happened has been dubbed “the worst blunder in the history of college football.”

The sad thing is that it started out well. Roy recovered a fumble by one of his own teammates, but after picking up the football he got disoriented and ran with the ball 69 yards in the wrong direction! His teammates, the coaches, even the crowd was screaming at him to turn around, but he was running like a man

possessed. Finally, at the 3 yard line (just before he would have scored for the other team), his own quarterback caught up with him and tackled him.

Bewildered, Riegels got up, realized what he had done and was totally and completely humiliated. He took himself out of the game, went to the bench and sat there with his head in his hands, wanting to disappear. He couldn't believe he had done something so stupid, and hurt his team so badly.

Oh friends, in football, and in life, sometimes you fumble, sometimes you stumble, sometimes things go terribly wrong.

Sometimes, as I said, in football and in life, things go wrong and it's not our fault. Bad things just happen.

But there are times, more times than we want to admit, that things go wrong because of something we do. Such is the case in both scripture lessons this morning. Actually, the story of human fumbling and doing wrong, starts with the scripture lesson from Genesis that you heard read earlier.

You know the story as well as I do. God created the heavens and earth, and it was good and perfect and just as God intended. Then God created humanity and said “Here. Here, Adam and Eve, enjoy this beautiful creation. Care for it, tend it, enjoy it. It’s all for you, except for one thing. Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Just that one. All the others, fine. But don’t eat from that one.”

So what did they do? They ate from that one. Why? Well, why do we do things we know we’re not supposed to, things we shouldn’t? Perhaps because we think we know better, or that it won’t hurt anybody, or maybe just this one time – you know, we find excuses.

Biblical scholars actually say that by eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. They wanted to have the knowledge of good and evil, they wanted to call the shots. So they didn’t listen to him, instead doing what they pleased.

And when they did, the perfect world God created changed in an instant. Trust was broken, God’s heart no doubt was broken. The relationship changed.

Where before there was only pure love, now Adam and Eve had put up a wall between themselves and God.

And it got worse when God questioned them about their actions. Instead of being honest and straightforward and confessing what they had done, they did what we do so many times – they tried to rationalize their actions and blame somebody else. Eve blamed the wily serpent and then, get this! Adam blamed God in a way, because he said to God, “The woman you gave me, made me do it!”

And where did the blaming get them? More humiliated, more ashamed, more aware of their estrangement from God. It was like Roy Riegels sitting on that bench so despondent because of his failure – Adam and Eve wandered through the garden ashamed, so aware of how they had fallen from grace. They’d had it all, and through their greed and their ignoring God’s guidance, it was gone. Sometimes we fumble, and they fumbled but good!

So did Peter in the Gospel lesson. You know that story well too. It’s the last days of Jesus’ life and everyone, it seems, is out to get him. At this point in the story, Judas has already betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver. Jesus is being

taken away by those who seek to end his life, and someone sees Peter and asks him if he's one of Jesus' disciples. And, scared for his life, he says, "No." Not once, not twice, but three times. When Jesus needed someone to stand up for him the most, Peter, his trusted disciple, failed him miserably. It was the biggest fumble of his life.

The Bible is filled with stories of human fumbling. Try as we might, we stumble and fall, we sin. And when we do, no matter how we rationalize it or try to make light of it, things change. Sin affects our relationship with others, if we're honest and admit the sin, it most assuredly affects our own self image, and worst and most of all, it affects our relationship with God. It puts up a wall between us and God. We know that we have done what we should not have done, what God would not want us to do – and it changes our relationship with him.

Adam and Eve were ashamed, embarrassed for God to even look at them. Peter was dejected and knew that he had let the Lord down. And isn't it true that when you and I sin, if we're honest about it and admit it to ourselves, we're embarrassed and dejected as well. "How can God love me when I did such a thing? God must be ashamed of my lying, my cheating. God heard that foul language I used. God saw me cheat – on that test, on my taxes, on my spouse." There's no

hiding from our sin, is there? It dogs us, hangs over us like a big wet cloak. And it keeps us from being the people God calls us to be, the people God created us to be.

We know all too well, don't we, what Roy Riegels felt like sitting on that bench after his disastrous play, don't we, because we feel like that after we've sinned – head down, despondent, knowing we've made things bad for ourselves and those around us, knowing we haven't been who God wants us to be.

It's an awful thing to bear a burden like that. It's awful to feel worthless, to feel foolish, to feel like we've failed so miserably, to feel like we've failed God. Bearing unconfessed sin is like that. It's a burden that can take us down.

Do you know that when Roy Riegels went to the bench and nearly broke down, his coach came up to him and said, "Roy, get up, go back out there, the game is only half over. Get up, brush it off, get up, get back in there!" Which he did, and all the reports say that he had a stellar second half, even blocking a punt by the other team. Though Georgia Tech ended up winning the game, and while Roy Riegels may not have gotten a championship ring, maybe he got something more

valuable that day – a lesson that sometimes you fumble, but you don't have to let it take you down or keep you down.

That's a valuable lesson for us as people of faith as well - that God wants us to know that though sometimes we fumble, our sin doesn't need to take us down or keep us down. Redemption, new life is possible.

Because as much as God hates our sin, he doesn't want us to be taken down by the burden of it. God loves us more than he hates our sin, and he has provided a way out of that burden for us – through the forgiveness, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

God reminds us, like Roy's coach did, that though we've sinned and fallen short, the game, life, isn't over and he offers us the chance to get back up start again. As we hear it put so beautifully in scripture, "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteous."

That's what it takes – confession. Bowing before God, and not blaming circumstances or someone else, just confessing. Period. We don't have to beat ourselves up endlessly, what we need to do is bow down and say, "I'm sorry, Lord. I'm sorry for my sin, I'm sorry for failing to be who you want me to be. I'm laying my sin at your feet, and asking for forgiveness."

As hard as it is, we can do that, we can face who we are and what we have done, because we know we have a God who loves us and wants us to be healthy, whole and free of the burden of unconfessed sin. The depth of his mercy and grace is unfathomable.

I close with "an old story of two farmers who lived side by side. One day the fence between the two farms was pushed down, and the livestock of one farmer trampled the garden of the other farmer. The farmer whose garden was damaged was so irate that he rounded up the animals and refused to return them until their owner had paid in full for the damages. The farmer whose livestock had caused the problem was genuinely sorry. He apologized, paid the damages, took his cows home, and repaired the fence. A few days later, ironically, the opposite thing happened! The other man's livestock pushed the fence down and got into the other garden. But this farmer, who had a golden opportunity to retaliate, chose to come

at the problem in a different way. He rounded up the cows and returned them to their owner.

The owner, red-faced and embarrassed, reached for his checkbook. 'I suppose you have the damages figured, so let me pay you and get it over with. How much do I owe you?'

'Nothing, nothing at all, not a penny,' said the good farmer. 'We are neighbors, and I'd much rather lose my garden than your friendship.'" (James W. Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, "The Sin of Halfheartedness," p.40-41)

Friends, God is like that good and benevolent farmer. He wants our friendship. He's not keeping score, he wants a clean slate, his mercy is unending, his grace, indeed amazing. God doesn't want us to live red-faced and embarrassed, or try to hide away from him in shame, rather he wants us to live forgiven and freed, and waits to give us that gift.

The only way we can receive it is with our arms wide open, which means, we have to lay down the sin that we're carrying, whatever it is.

Friends, in any relationship, is it not a terrible thing when something comes between you and the other person? How much more terrible is it when something comes between you and God?

If, right now, something has come between you and God, and that something is your sin, something that you have done that you ought not have done, I invite you to lay it down at God's feet, open your heart, make your confession, and then allow him to "put you back in the game" if you will, and make a fresh start.

Let us pray. O Lord God, each of us knows that too often we sin and fall short of being the people you want us to be. Some of our sins seem inconsequential to us, and others weigh us down. We live in a world that hardly recognizes sin any more – it's rationalized away like everybody does it, so what's the big deal. We've become so good at blaming others and saying something's not really that bad. Truth be told, we know it is, and in this moment we quit hiding and open our hearts to you. Hear now, as we pray in silence, the sins we confess.

Lord, walk with us now into new life, as those who are forgiven and freed.
May we never ever forget the depth of your mercy and the abundance of your love
and grace in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.