Excuses, Excuses, Excuses

Early in our marriage my wife, Karen, and I got tickets to see *The Elephant Man*, which at the time was the hottest show on Broadway. I got those tickets months in advance and they were good seats, too. By the way, I love tickets. I am a very future-oriented person, so to me tickets are so much more than little pieces of cardstock. No, tickets are potent little talismans of anticipation. They have a certain power to them. And, because this was to be a special evening, I also got reservations at the best restaurant in the vicinity of the theater.

When the long-anticipated day arrived, after the main course and before dessert arrived, I took the tickets out of my pocket. I’m with Charlie Brown, who said, “Happiness is holding the tickets in your hand.” But as I looked at the tickets, my face went ashen, enough to prompt Karen to ask, “Are you alright? What’s wrong?” Well, they were good seats alright, but the tickets were for Tuesday night and this was Wednesday. We were a day late.

After apologizing to Karen, who was much more understanding than I would have been under the circumstances, I tried to reassure her. “Oh, theaters always have extra seats, even when they say they are sold out. They’ll figure something out. I mean, this is a really unusual circumstance. I’m sure they’ll understand our predicament and we’ll get in.” So we skipped dessert, quickly paid the bill and headed over to the theater. I showed the tickets to the ticket taker at the door and told him the story of how we ended up with tickets for the wrong night—or, at least, I started to tell the story. Before I could get very far, however, he pointed to a corner of the lobby and said, “Wait over here for Miss Morris.”

That response seemed promising and gave me a bit of time to think about how best to explain our situation to Miss Morris when she arrived. I would tell her that we have had the tickets for months. I would assure her that I have never done anything like this before, that I’m actually a very responsible person. And I might even throw in that I am a minister to see if that helps. (I know that’s kind of cheesy, but desperate circumstances call for desperate measures.) When I had assembled all of my unique excuses, we simply waited for Miss Morris.

After a few minutes passed, I saw the ticket taker talking to another couple and then pointing to the corner where we were standing. The couple came over and stood by us, acting rather anxious. After a bit of time, we were joined by another pair, and then another. Needless to say, their presence made me uneasy. Tentatively, we began to share our stories. One couple was from out of state and left their tickets at home. A woman said she picked up the wrong purse when she left her house. Two folks had an excuse very
similar to mine—they had not noticed that their tickets were for the matinee performance that day and not the evening performance. French filmmaker Jean Renoir observed that we live in a time when, “Everyone has his reasons.” And, to be sure, in that corner of the lobby, everyone had his reasons or her reasons. In one another’s company, however, the power of our excuses faded quickly. They no longer seemed compelling or unique. They became rather embarrassing, actually.

Eventually Miss Morris came over to our little group, patiently heard our stories, or some abridged version of them, and let us in the theater—for standing room. That, I learned, is where excuse givers are sent—not to hell, perhaps, but to standing room.

I wonder how many excuses the omnipotent Miss Morris hears every day—our unique excuses, repeated over and over again. And if Miss Morris hears a lot of excuses, I wonder how many excuses God hears every day.

In his book, *Teacher Man*, Frank McCourt, the Irish author of several wonderful memoirs, tells of his experience teaching English at a rough-and-tumble public high school in Staten Island. After he had been at the school for a time, he began to collect the notes he received from students excusing their absence or their inability to complete an assignment. Those notes supposedly were from a parent, but they were clearly forged. Nothing particularly noteworthy in that.

What interested McCourt, however, and why he saved the excuse notes, is how wonderfully written they were, far superior to any other writing his students would do. He writes, “If [their parents] could read those notes they’d discover their kids capable of the finest American prose: fluent, imaginative, clear, dramatic, fantastic, focused, persuasive, useful.”

“The stove caught fire and the wallpaper went up and the fire department kept us out of the house all night.”

“Arnold doesn’t have his work today because he was getting off the train yesterday and the door closed on his school bag and the train took it away. He yelled to the conductor who said very vulgar things as the train drove away. Something should be done.”

“A man died in the bathtub upstairs and it overflowed and messed up all Roberta’s homework on the table.

“Her big brother got mad at her and threw her essay out the window and it flew away all over Staten Island which is not a good thing because people will read it and get the wrong impression unless they read the ending which explains everything.”

“We were evicted from our apartment and the mean sheriff said if my son kept yelling for his notebook he’d have us all arrested.”

McCourt reflects, “Isn’t it remarkable, I thought, how they resist any kind of writing assignment in class or at home. They whine and say they’re busy and it’s hard
putting two hundred words together on any subject. Why? I have a drawer full of excuse notes that could be turned into an anthology of Great American Excuses.”

So one day he gave his students an assignment. He wrote it on the board “An Excuse Note from Adam to God,” or, “An excuse note from Eve to God.” He told his students that they could start their essays in class and finish them at home. He writes, “The heads went down. Pens raced across paper. They could do this with one hand tied behind their backs.... The bell rang, and for the first time in my three and a half years of teaching, I saw high school students so immersed they had to be urged out of the room by friends hungry for lunch.”

That assignment prompted the most imaginative and expressive writing he had seen from his students. They came up with some brilliant excuses for Adam and Eve.

I wonder how many excuses Frank McCourt heard during his tenure at that school? He said he had a desk drawer full of excuse notes. I wonder how big that drawer was. And if that drawer was big, I wonder how big the drawer God must have to hold all of our excuses.

Humankind wasted no time before making excuses for our behavior. According to the biblical account, among the very first words spoken by a man or a woman were words of excuse. God asked Adam, “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Adam responded, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate.” God then turned to Eve: “What is it you have done?” Eve replied, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

But it doesn’t end there. The Bible is full of excuses. Could it be any other way? After all, human life is full of excuses. So when Moses is addressed by God from the burning bush, calling him to lead the people of Israel out of exile in Egypt, Moses immediately begins to offer excuses why he cannot. He tries one excuse after another. When each excuse doesn’t work, he just moves on to the next. First, Moses says, in essence, “Why me? I’m not the right person for this job.” When God addresses that excuse, Moses goes on to the next one: “I don’t have any authority.” When God assures Moses that he will go with God’s own authority, he says, “The people won’t believe that you sent me.” I will give you a sign, God replies. Moses comes back, “But I have a bad stutter. And it’s worse when I’m nervous. Who’s going to listen to me?” The Lord, who between the time of Adam and the time of Moses has already heard every excuse in the book, responds, “Your brother Aaron can speak for you.” Finally, Moses, out of excuses, is reduced to pleading, “Oh please send someone else.” Moses could have used Aldous Huxley’s advice: “Several excuses are always less convincing than one.”

Then, later in the book of Exodus, Moses is on the receiving end of excuses. When he comes down from Mount Sinai after receiving from God the Ten Commandments, he finds the people dancing around a statue of a golden calf in an act of worship. Moses, who has left his brother Aaron in charge, confronts him. Aaron immediately starts to makes excuses: “You know the people. They are bent on evil. They said to me, ‘Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’” So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold,
take it off’; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!’” (Exodus 32:22b-24). Notice: It’s the people’s fault! It’s your fault, Moses! It’s the calf’s fault! (Out came this calf? What can I tell you?) Huxley was right: several excuses are always less convincing than one.

In one of Jesus’ parables he compares the kingdom of God to a great banquet. There is a broad invitation, but many give excuses for why they cannot attend: “I’ve just bought some real estate and I must tend to it; please accept my regrets.” “I’ve just bought some new farm equipment—two oxen—and I want to take them for a spin.” “I just got married. I’ll be on my honeymoon.” And here’s the painful part of that parable: Those who offer excuses miss out. We might even think that they are good excuses, but even good excuses can prevent one from experiencing the greatest blessing of all.

I am going to make a bold statement here: Excuses have no place in the Christian life. As Christians, we don’t have to make excuses. We may still offer excuses, to be sure, but we don’t need to. In fact, it is something like a lack of faith to offer excuses. We don’t need to offer self-justifying excuses. In fact, we can’t justify ourselves. That is God’s job. After all, we are, in Paul’s wonderful phrase, “justified by grace through faith.” There is another way to put this: We are free to recognize that we are not perfect people. We can do that because we rely on the perfect love of God. So the Christian alternatives to excuses are confession and forgiveness.

I don’t know how it is with you, but sometimes I am tempted to throw some excuses in with my confessions. “God, here’s what I did and I’m really sorry, but let me tell you why I did that. I had my reasons. Everyone has his reasons.” But that’s not really a confession, is it? Author Kimberly Johnson advises, “Never ruin an apology with an excuse.” That’s good advice that applies to confession as well: “Never ruin a confession with an excuse.” We can afford to do that because we rely on the forgiveness of God.

How big is that drawer where God keeps our excuse notes? It’s got to be really big. But this is also true: it is not as big as God’s capacity for forgiveness.

The other alternative to making excuses is to practice forgiveness with one another. What if we regularly offered one another assurances and signs of forgiveness? What if we were the kind of community that regularly, consistently offered forgiveness to one another? Would we need excuses anymore? That is, after all, the kind of life that we are called to live. We are regularly to forgive one another in the name of the God who continually, consistently forgives us all. And if we do, there is no longer a need for excuses.

We expect that in the world it will be excuses, excuses, excuses. And sometimes it will be that way among us, as well. After all, such habits are hard to break. But what if we really believed in the forgiveness of God and could rely on the forgiveness of one another?

What if, instead of excuses, excuses, excuses, we heard forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness?