

1 When I was just a kid growing up in Golden Valley, way back in the long ago, before video games or even color television, when I wasn't at school or inside doing homework, I was outside playing with the other kids in the neighborhood. Kick the Can was our favorite variant of Capture the Flag, but we also played games like Statue Maker, where the person in the middle (the statue maker) would spin someone around until releasing their hands and flinging their bodies off into the grass. Then, the "fling-ee" had to freeze into a statue, and the statue maker had to guess what they were representing. Did any of you play either of those games, Kick the Can, or Statue Maker?

How about this game? You form a circle standing and hold each other's hands. The leader starts the circle moving in one direction, and everyone sings this song:

*Ring-a-round the rosies,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes! Ashes!
We all fall down.*

I guess the fun of the game was that, upon hearing "we all fall down," we all fell down, literally, dragging each other down as we held onto each other's hands as we fell. We'd get up and do that over and over again, without worrying about what the words meant and not being bothered by the simplicity and repetitiveness of the game. How many of you played "Ring Around the Rosies?" Do any of you still play it, with your children or grandchildren?

There are versions of this rhyme that date back to the 1700's, in different languages and with significantly different words. There's an urban myth that the rhyme was a reference to the Bubonic Plague that hit London in the late 1600's, but that's largely been debunked. For tonight, let's appropriate the lyrics in a new way, a way almost certainly never intended by the person who first picked up a quill and ink to write this rhyme down. We recently spent some time in Sunday worship reflecting on our mortality, so for tonight let's take "we all fall down" to mean not so much the limits we have in our years spent in these bodies, but rather the limits we face in our love of God and neighbor. We all fall down, as in, we all fall short of the glory of God, or as in, humanity's fall from grace. And we do all fall down,

again and again. And when we fall down in these ways, it's not a game anymore. Falling down of this kind has real consequences for ourselves, our relationship with God, and those we share this world with. The Good News is that Jesus will pick us up and put us on our feet again, but before we can fully embrace that hope, we have to endure the pain of falling down, the pain that provokes us to turn away from what we know is wrong and plead for the mercy of Jesus.

Let's hear what the Apostle Paul had to say about this in the third chapter of his letter to the Romans. **{Read Romans 3:10-24, The Message}**

2 This passage from Romans is certainly colorful, especially the words quoted from the Psalms and in the contemporary language of Eugene Peterson. Listen to some of the creative allusions to sin, what I'm calling tonight falling down, and see if something in your own life doesn't come to mind: Sitting in a sinking boat; not living right; not knowing the score; not alert for God; taking the wrong turn; wandering down blind alleys; throats like a gaping grave; tongues slick as mud slides; words tinged with poison; racing for the honor of sinner-of-the-year; littering the land with heartbreak and ruin; not knowing the first thing about living with others; and never giving God the time of day.

Do any of those images ring true for you? Do you really grasp your predicament apart from Jesus, sitting in the same sinking boat as everyone else? I think that's hard for us. Here in Minnesota we like to think of ourselves as above average. Certainly, all of us have in mind some people who we'd say are bigger scoundrels than we are. I mean, "littering the land with heartbreak and ruin?" That's really harsh! Surely were better than that? Or maybe not.

The classic illustration of our tendency to give ourselves too much credit is an enormous room with a twenty-foot high ceiling. All of humanity, past and present are lined up in the room, and their goodness in this room is reflected by how close they are in height to the ceiling. On one end of the room, people like Adolph Hitler and Judas take their place as the moral midgets, while on the other side of the room are the towering moral leaders, such as Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King, Jr., who's heads are scraping the ceiling. When asked to place ourselves in this moral lineup, most of us say we're decent people who try our best, and we tend to put ourselves somewhere north of average, perhaps in the

seventy-fifth percentile.

There are at least two problems with our self-assessment. The first, of course, is that we can't all be above average. The second is that the real measuring stick isn't the righteousness of Martin Luther King, jr or Mother Theresa. It's Jesus. If Jesus was in the room, the roof would have to come off, because no human being, other than Jesus, approaches the righteousness of God. Apart from Jesus, we're not just doing ok in the upper percentiles, we're sitting in the same sinking boat with everyone else. We all fall down, we do it alone or together, and we do it over and over and over again.

3 Thank God for the ashes. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down. If it weren't for the ashes, the story would be all bad news. You probably never thought of ashes as a sign of hope, but they really are. Why? Because the ashes remind us that there's a way for us to get out of the sinking boat of sin, to stop falling down, again and again. Yes, the ashes remind us of our mortality, that we were made from the dust of the earth and that these bodies will return to the dust of the earth. Yes, the ashes remind us of that awful day we call Good Friday when the Son of God was beaten and nailed to a cross with iron spikes. But the ashes also remind us of the hopeful message Jesus came to proclaim: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

And there it is. Repentance is how we get out of the sinking boat. When we stop our pathetic attempts to save ourselves and start letting God do the saving, the ashes become good news, a fertile ground for hope that on the other side of our suffering is new life, just as the other side of the cross of crucifixion was resurrection for Jesus. Ashes, ashes, we all confess and turn away from our failing self-sufficiency and discover that Jesus has already done the work of lifting us up so we don't have to keep falling down.

4 The messes we make our lives are not the end of the story. Just as God made us out of the dust, God can also remake us into the beautiful children of God. I invite you to watch this music video. Each of the characters in the video is imprisoned by a fatal flaw, like greed or addiction. Watch what happens when the little girl with the polaroid camera reminds them that God is in the business of making beautiful things out of dirt. The dust of repentance is never the end of the story. God is always planting seeds of hope, taking root in the tilled soil of our hearts. [{Show video: You Make Beautiful Things \(4:44\)}](#)



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