

Knick Knack Paddy Wack and Other Songs for Losing Face

Ash Wednesday Story by Bob Kuntz

On the way into the church for the Ash Wednesday service, Rev Roger caught himself singing,

If you're sorry and you know it, make amends.

If you're sorry and you know it, make amends.

If you're sorry and you know it, then your life will truly show it.

If you're sorry and you know it, make amends.

Roger looked around the parking lot sheepishly, afraid someone might have heard.

Rev Roger is the mythical pastor of Busy & Burned Out UMC, an imaginary church in the North Coast District. Whenever he thinks about dust and ashes, he finds himself singing. Sometimes it works out OK. In the privacy of your own home, you can see dust on the mantle and hum *It's my party and I'll cry if I want to*. But it's embarrassing at Bible study. Last week, Roger had been talking about the LORD God creating man and woman from the dust of the earth and found himself humming *Who's sorry now?* And then there was the time, when Rev Roger went to the psalm service at the monastery. They read the Psalm 102, with the line near the end, "For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink..." In the midst of the silence afterwards, the sanctuary filled with the soft sound of Rev Roger singing:

Mama don't allow no apologizin' 'round here.

Mama don't allow no apologizin' 'round here.

I don't care what mama don't allow, gonna say I'm sorry anyhow,

Mama don't allow no apologizin' 'round here.

For weeks afterwards, the monks sent Roger e-mails ribbing him about that.

Rev Roger pulled on the big wooden door to the church. It creaked open and he headed to the sacristy to prepare the ashes for worship. *This singing stuff is all Sue's fault*, Roger thought. His wife, Sue, could hardly be called the inspiration for his singing over dust and ashes. More accurately, she was the desperation for it.

In college, Roger had a favorite sweater. Sue said it looked like moths had feasted on it for decades and then went in search of something that wasn't stale. One

night, he put it. She said, “You’re not going to wear that?” Roger said, “My grandmother knitted me this sweater!” Sue replied, “And if you wear it, even to bowling, she’ll roll over in her grave. She’ll put a sheet over her tombstone so no one knows her name.” Then Sue began to sing,

“Holely, holely, holely! Roger, it’s too holely.

Wear it some inside the house, but not outside again.

Holey, holey, holey, it looks like something moley.

Don’t wear it in public: we can’t stand the shame!”

Roger changed his sweater. After bowling, he took Sue out to dinner. He swore afterwards he wasn’t trying to get even, it was just something that happened – that it happened because he was glad to be out with her. The waiter brought Roger’s soup and Sue’s salad, and then returned a few minutes later, to ask how his soup was.

Roger answered him in song:

“When peas in rich broth are brought on the tray

When crackers are placed by the bowl

When candles are lit and my gal’s here to stay

It is well, soup and all, with my soul.

I will tell, It is well, Far from hell, Soup is swell, in my bowl.”

Roger always figured if Sue married him after that, she knew what she was in for.

Their first big fight had been about laundry. Roger was mad because he went down the basement and found four baskets full of dirty clothes. As he stuffed clothes in the washer, he fumed *What’s wrong with that woman? Can’t she even get laundry done!* Roger dumped clothes in the machine, just like he used to do at college. He did not think about his new red sweatshirt. He did not read the tag, even though Sue had mentioned it four annoying times when they bought it.

Sue came down the basement stairs just when Roger was pulling Sue’s once white, once favorite, now pink-streaked nightgown from the washing machine. She gasped. He turned. They faced each other like Western gunfighters.

“What’s wrong with you?” Sue yelled. “If you can’t do a job right, just leave it for me!”

Roger shot back: “If you ever did the laundry, I wouldn’t have to!”

Sue stormed: "It's MY fault? You mess up and have the nerve to blame me!"

It was Indian summer weather that September, but for three unforgettable days the temperature between Roger and Sue was lower than at the McMurdo Station in Antarctica.

Their next Occasion of Marital Intensity came a month later. As they prepared for a two week vacation, Sue asked Roger numerous times, "Did you cancel the newspaper?" Finally Roger shouted. "You don't have to remind me a million times! I said I'll do it and I'll do it!" Sue continued unperturbed, "And you'll fix that leaking sink in the basement?" "I said I'll do it and I'll do it!" Roger snarled. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Sue had the grace not to answer that question. They both saw the answer when they returned home two weeks later to find 14 newspapers on the front lawn and an inch of water in the basement.

Roger waved the flag at her as if she were a snorting bull. He said, "I suppose you're going to make a federal case out of this."

Sue looked at him as if he were a tennis ball she was going to smash back over the net. "You don't listen to me! You don't take me seriously!" Sue cried and stomped off. Both of them were frightened. *Will we always lose it and scream at each other?* Twenty minutes later, Sue waved a white handkerchief around the corner of the livingroom doorway and sang,

*The more we say "I'm sorry," "I'm sorry," "I'm sorry,"
The more we say "I'm sorry" the happier we'll be.
With my amends and your amends and your amends and my amends
The more we say "I'm sorry" the happier we'll be.*

Roger sang back to her,
*This old man, what a bum! Said he would, but he's too dumb.
With a knick knack paddy wack give the dog a bone.
Can he still be welcome home?*

Sue kissed him. Roger sang,
*This old man, messed up, two, failed again, what can you do?
With a knick knack paddy wack, I'm so far off base*

I've got ashes on my face.

Sue kissed him again. And Roger sang,
*This old man, messed up, three. Thank you for forgiving me.
With a knick knack paddy wack, ashes on your face.
Look to Jesus and embrace.*

Not long after that, Sue got pregnant. She gained weight like she was eating for the Cleveland Browns. She had morning sickness for every pregnant woman in Cuyahoga County. One morning Roger got a call at church. Sue sobbed into the phone, "I can't do this anymore! I threw up for the fourth time this morning. It's all over the bathroom. Can you come home? I can't face it."

All the way home Roger wondered what to say to her. Do you say, "It's OK, honey, I don't mind if you throw up."? Somehow that didn't sound comforting. Do you say, "It won't last much longer."? Roger worried that if he said that, Sue would throw something at him. He tried four other, equally lousy responses, and concluded he did not have a clue and was a failure as a husband.

He walked in the back door, went straight to the cleaning cupboard for the bucket and wash rags, and followed his nose to the bathroom. That night, when he came back home from hospital calls, Sue had their good dishes on the table, and candles lit. *What's this for?* Roger wondered. *I didn't know what to say.*

They sat down to his favorite meal, pork chops with apple stuffing. Sue said, "I felt so embarrassed today. I felt like a failure. And then I heard you singing in the bathroom."

Roger said, "I was singing?"

Sue laughed. "I didn't think you would remember it. You were singing,
*'What a friend we have in Lysol, all our sins and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to clean-up, everything my wife can share.'*
When I heard that, I knew I was going to be OK. I knew the baby was going to be OK. I knew that no matter how many more times I lose it, that you were going to be there for me."

That song made it official. Whenever they had a bad fight, when somebody lost face, someone ended up singing. Sue's favorite was to the tune of *Blowin' in the Wind*:

How many times can a man be wrong, before he admits it like a man?

Roger's favorite memory was from the night that Sue called him at the office at 9:30. "Roger, you've been at work all day." "I'll finish up and come home," he said. At 10:45, the phone rang again. Sue sang,

*"Come home, come home; you who are weary, come home.
Earnestly tenderly your wife is pleading,
calling, 'O husband, come home.'"*

Roger left his papers on the desk, turned off the light and went home. When he arrived, Sue was on the phone, talking long-distance to her sister. Roger knew it would not be a short call. At midnight, he sang to her,

*"The phone; the phone; you who are talking hang up the phone;
earnestly tenderly your husband is pleading,
calling 'O hang up the phone.'"*

At church on Ash Wednesday, Roger reached the sacristy and hung up his coat. He opened the cupboard, slid a glass bowl to the front and shook a spoonful of ashes into it. Then he added a few drops of oil. *What a recipe*, he thought, *you take the palms from last year's Palm Sunday – those triumphant moments when we were sure we were right. But our strength and certainty, even our rightness, they all come to dust and ashes. You mix that with the oil of the Holy Spirit. To the world, it looks like a mess. But when you make the sign of the cross on people's foreheads, it's the love of God.*

The Ash Wednesday service began with the organ prelude, a soft plaintive tune of yearning for forgiveness. When it came time for the Scripture, Rev Roger read one of his favorite Psalms, Psalm 51: **Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.** (Psalm 51:1-3)

Then came the choir anthem. Then a second Scripture: **Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who humbles himself to look down upon the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.** (Psalm 113:5-8)

Roger said, “God doesn’t ask us to do what he won’t do. He humbles himself to look upon us. He humbles himself to send his Son to earth and have Christ die on the cross, forgiving us who wronged him. We look pretty silly with ashes on our face. That’s our way of admitting we looked pretty silly all those times we messed up. Let’s not be afraid to lose face tonight. Let us humble ourselves and own up to our sin so God can redeem us and make us His. Let’s trust the promise of this Psalm, that the Lord will raise us from the dust and lift us from the ash heap, to sit with Christ on his throne.”

A few minutes later, Rev Roger was standing below the worship platform, at the end of the main aisle, holding the glass bowl of ashes. People came forward. Rev Roger dipped his thumb in the ashes and without thinking he started singing, “This old man, he sinned four. Will you mess up evermore? With a knick knack paddy wack, ashes on your face. Look to Jesus and embrace.”