

“SEVEN WORDS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE:
II – ‘SORRY’”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
January 12, 2020

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Colossians 3:12-17

Matthew 3:13-17

Way back in 1970, when I was fifteen years old, I joined millions and millions of others who made their way to the movie theatre to see the hit movie of the day – a little movie called “Love Story.” I know some of you remember it. It starred Ryan O’Neal and Ali McGraw, and it was everything a love story should be. The thing I most remember about my experience with “Love Story” was leaving the theatre sobbing, and I mean, sobbing. (If you haven’t seen it, let me just say, it was not a happy ending.)

At any rate, teenage me and all the others who saw “Love Story” loved it and for some reason, we all picked up on its most famous line, which was “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” Oh, how romantic is that. Ali McGraw staring into Ryan O’Neal’s eyes and saying with deep emotion, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.”

Well, you can tell I was a teenager, because I fell for that. Now that I’m older and wiser, I can tell you, that that is about the most stupid line ever uttered!

“Love means never having to say you’re sorry?” Wrong. No, love means always being willing to say you’re sorry.

“Sorry,” is the word for today, the second word in this seven sermon series on words that can change our lives. Being able and willing to say sorry is talked about all through holy scripture, it’s a virtue that leads to whole lives – our own and those to whom we apologize.

Yet, it is a word that, too often, we’re reluctant to say. Why? Well, pride maybe. We don’t want to admit we’ve made a mistake or sinned. Or, maybe it’s about power. Sadly, admitting we’ve made a mistake, admitting we’re wrong, admitting we’ve sinned, is seen as a sign of weakness in our world. We learn, too early, to gloss over our mistakes and sins, excuse them, blame others, treat them as if they’re not a big deal, or in fact, try to hide them until we think they’ve gone away.

Well, as much as we try to do any of those things, our sins don't just magically go away. They have consequences. And one of the consequences is that they continue to affect us, and sometimes the person or persons against whom we have sinned. Most assuredly, unconfessed sin sits in our hearts keeping us from who we should truly be, and separating us from God.

The phrase "lost in sin" says it all. Unconfessed sin has a way of leaving us in a place we ought not be – estranged from God and from ourselves. There are so many hymns that say it so well – phrases like "I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore"; or "shackled by a heavy burden, 'neath a load of guilt and shame."

Not confessing, not saying we're sorry, indeed keeps us lost. And there's not much worse than being lost. One writer describes it like this:

"It is a terrible feeling and frightening (to be lost). Panic sets in quickly; you start walking fast, your eyes darting in every direction, scanning the horizon, searching frantically for any familiar sign. Then you begin to run, in the desperate hope that running may help you find your way more quickly. Time seems different when you are lost, and a scant few minutes of lostness may feel like an eternity. Being lost is an awful experience." (James W. Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, "Sin . . . and Grace," p. 101)

Though he's describing what it's like to be physically lost, his words ring true for being spiritually lost in sin as well. Unconfessed sin hangs in your heart, keeping you lost from yourself, lost from those whom you have sinned against, lost, it seems, from God.

I say, "it seems," because when we live with unconfessed sin, we find it hard to believe that God wants anything to do with us. How could God love me when I've done what I've done, and on top of that, not said "I'm sorry" for it? You see what I mean about levels of lostness?

Yet, when we sink deep in sin like that, as the hymn says, when we're lost in sins we haven't confessed, we forget what God is really like – we forget a little thing called "God's grace."

Which brings us to this morning's Gospel lesson, the account of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan by John. Though he was sinless, Jesus went down into the waters of baptism, to identify with us, to stand with us in our sinfulness, and to show us that, through him, God wipes away the power of sin.

And from that day to this, whenever a child of God is baptized, it is for the remission of sin. That doesn't mean, obviously, that we'll never sin, what it means

is that God's love and grace take away its power. All we need to do is surrender, say we are sorry, and let God's grace carry us forward into new life.

I read an absolutely beautiful story told by Bishop William Willimon this week about a baptismal font located in the Chapel at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina. "It is made from a huge stone which has been hollowed out for a font. On that very stone, a little over a hundred years ago, black slaves stood to be sold to the highest bidder. Today, the stone serves Belmont Abbey as its baptismal font. An inscription on the plaque tells all who enter those cleansing waters, "On this stone men were sold into slavery. From this stone men are now baptized into freedom." (William Willimon, *Remember Who You Are*, p. 61)

What a powerful image, and what a beautiful description of the way God's grace and God's forgiveness lead to freedom!

Yet, too often, we forget that, and instead hold onto our sin and wrongdoing, and let it fester. I remember reading about a Sunday School teacher who was trying to help his young students understand how toxic bearing unconfessed sin can be. He gave each of them a big plastic bag and some potatoes. He told them to think about things they had done wrong, sins they had committed, persons they had hurt, and for each one, put a potato in the bag.

Then he asked them to tie the bag shut, and keep it with them at all times – day and night. When they were in school, in the car, at games, at home with their family, at dinner – all the time. Just carry it with them.

Some of their bags were pretty full, and pretty heavy. And it was a real inconvenience to carry them around, as well as being pretty embarrassing.

But more than that, over time, the potatoes, trapped in that airless bag, began to stink, grow moldy, and grow 'eyes." It didn't take long for those kids to get the message, that carrying around unconfessed sin, that failing to say "I'm sorry," weighs you down, and keeps you from being the person God wants you to be. And they realized that the power to change it all lay in their hands, and in the grace of God.

"Sorry." A little word with a lot of power. A little word that says "I was wrong," and I ask for your forgiveness. A little word that says my relationship with you (the one I've wronged) and my relationship with God is more important than my ego.

As one person put it so beautifully: "Apologies – even small ones – are great big doorways through which God's grace can pour in."

Nothing is sadder than one who refuses to apologize, one who is lost in sin and chooses to stay there. And nothing is more beautiful than one who says “I’m sorry” and allows God’s grace to change their heart.

We need only look at the last days of Jesus’ earthly life to see the truth of those statements. The last days when a man by the name of Judas betrayed Jesus, and for the sake of some money, led him into his enemies’ hands – his enemies who would take his very life on the cross. To the end, Judas never apologized, even when he knew the horror of what he had done. For the scripture says that Judas, when realizing what he had done, tried to give the money back, but never apologized to Jesus – and so filled with guilt was he, so lost in sin, that he took his own life.

Contrast that with Peter, who also, sinned against Jesus in those last days by denying he was one of Jesus’ disciples. He, too, was wracked with guilt, but he threw himself on the grace of God, as he stood in front of Jesus, and proclaimed him Lord of his life, in effect, apologizing for the wrongs he had done.

You and I have choices in life – many of them – and one of the biggest ones is choosing to say we’re sorry when we have sinned and fallen short. Saying the word “sorry” is a great gift – a great gift to the one we’ve hurt, to Almighty God, and to ourselves.

It’s not always easy, but perhaps we would find it easier to open our hearts and confess if we remember our own baptism. If we remember that when the waters of baptism washed over us, we were reminded that God’s grace is sufficient, and sin need never have ultimate power over us again. That we are God’s beloved children, and we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us – even saying “I’m sorry.”

So if today, you are, like those students, carrying around a sack of potatoes, the burden of sin, and it’s weighing you down – let it go. Say “I’m sorry” and trust God’s grace to carry you into a new and free future. May it be so.

Amen.