

“WORDS OF WISDOM: V – SAY YOU’RE SORRY”

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Elkton United Methodist Church  
August 3, 2014

I John 1:5-10

Matthew 5:21-24

Okay, this morning’s sermon is going to start out a little differently than usual. We’re going to play a little game. I’m going to say a line from a famous movie, and you’re going to tell me what movie it’s from. Okay? Ready?

“Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” (Wizard of Oz)

“What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate.” (Cool Hand Luke)

“Show me the money!” (Jerry Maguire)

“My mama always said life is like a box of chocolates.” (Forrest Gump)

“Houston: We have a problem.” (Apollo 13)

All great lines, huh? I got them from a list of the 100 best lines of all times in movies.

Do you want to know what the worst, most stupid line ever in a movie was, in my humble opinion? It’s from the movie “Love Story” and it goes like this: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” What? You know, I can’t even believe that I fell for that once. I remember the first time I saw that movie. I was a teenager and of course, when I saw it, I fell madly in love with Ryan O’Neal and when he said that to his dying wife Ali MacGraw, I (and every other teenage girl who saw it) absolutely melted. Oh, how wonderful – love is so amazing, so wonderful, so powerful that you never have to say you’re sorry.

What a bunch of stuff! Love means never having to say your sorry – wrong! Love means always having to say you’re sorry, or at least, always being ready or willing to say you’re sorry.

There are no perfect relationships because relationships are made up of people and people sin and hurt other people – all the time. They just do. It’s been happening since the dawn of time, when in that perfect garden, Adam and Eve not only didn’t do what God said, which was to stay away from one particular tree; but when He confronted them, they couldn’t bring themselves to apologize. Instead they made excuses – Eve said the serpent made her do it, Adam said Eve made him do it, and then the ultimate zinger – he said to God, “Eve, the woman you gave me” – so he, in essence, blamed God as well.

Oh, do we have a tough time saying we're sorry. We have a hard time doing it. Why? Well, because perhaps we see it as a sign of weakness, and secondly, it means we have to be honest with ourselves, and we're not so good at that either. We hate to admit we did wrong, and even more, hate to admit it publicly, by apologizing. So far too often we don't apologize, and bad situations become worse.

Jesus knew that when, in this morning's Gospel lesson, he talked about the importance of being reconciled to those whom you have hurt. He says do that before you come before the altar, because it is a barrier, not only between you and that other person, it also is a barrier between you and God.

Yet knowing that, even still, a lot of us have unresolved issues with people, a lot of us hold grudges, a lot of us have not sought reconciliation of problems between us and others. We have not apologized for things we have done. And so the barrier remains.

Apologizing for what we've done is hard, but it gets even harder the longer it goes without resolution. And nothing will change, until someone comes forward and has the courage and humility to say "I'm sorry."

And that's a real "I'm sorry," not some sad excuse for "I'm sorry." You know what I mean? Someone spelled out the many different lame excuses for apologies that there are – like this one: "I'm sorry, but . . ." "I'm sorry, but I was only trying to help." "I'm sorry, but you started it." "I'm sorry, but . . ." not a real apology, because there's an excuse attached to it which implies it's not all my fault. Not a real apology.

Nor is the apology that goes like this: "I'm sorry if . . ." "I'm sorry if I hurt you" or "I'm sorry if you were offended." What you're saying is the onus is on the other person – if you were offended, if you were hurt, okay, then I'm sorry. It's not really my fault, it's yours.

A true apology is simply that – an apology. "I am sorry for what I did. I am sorry for what I said. I am sorry I hurt you." Period. No evasions, no if's, and's or but's, simply saying, "I'm sorry." That's the first step on the bridge to healing.

This week I read about a man who received an email from a long-lost friend of his – long lost because of something bad that friend had done to him. Listen to his words: "When I was twenty I had a friend who treated me rather lousy. That is not my interpretation (he writes). That is an objective fact. Eight years later I am living here in Kansas City and I receive an email from her – after 8 years with no communication whatsoever. The email read: 'I will be traveling to the Kansas City area for business and I heard from a friend that you were living there. Would you like to have dinner with me? Then her signature. Then a post-script that read: 'I completely understand if you turn down this invitation because I treated you so badly.' (Then he wrote) Those were not her exact words. Her exact words were unrepeatable in church and very self-deprecating. When I read the top half of that

email my answer was, ‘No way!’ When I read the post-script, my answer changed to ‘Sure, why not?’ (On-line, “Adventures in Apologizing,” RevThom, 9/23/07)

You see, it was the apology that broke down the barrier – the honest, brutally honest admission of guilt by his friend that broke down the barrier and invited new life.

That’s what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel lesson – the new life that is possible in relationships when there is an apology – a honest, true, forthright apology, an admission of sin.

And if that’s the case between two human beings, how much more is it needed between us and God Himself? Isn’t He the One against whom we sin the most? And clearly, isn’t He the One with whom we need to make peace before we come before His altar?

And sadly, isn’t He the One from whom we most often try to hide our sins, or at least, not admit them? Yet, look at what the lesson from I John said: “If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

We need to trust that – trust that enough to apologize to God for those things that put a barrier between us and Him – our sins. Perhaps we would be more willing to do that if we could remember that God is like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Do you remember that story? The story about the son who took his inheritance ahead of time, left his father and older brother to slave away on the family farm, and took off to do what he wanted, when he wanted, spending whatever he wanted. And before he knew it – it was all gone – and he realized what a fool he’d been – how he had indeed sinned against his father. So, screwing up his courage, he determined to make his way back home, slow himself at his father’s feet, apologize and beg for mercy.

But before he could even get very far up the lane toward the family farm, it was his father who came running to him. It was his father who came with arms stretched open wide to hug him, it was his father who showered love upon him, it was his father who led him into a new life.

That’s what God is like – the Father who loves us so much he runs to embrace us, and lead us into new life – forgiven and free. If we would just remember that, maybe we wouldn’t be so reluctant to say to Him, “I’m sorry, Lord. I’m sorry for what I have done. I’m sorry I sinned. I’m sorry.”

My friends, may you and I have the courage to say “I’m sorry” whenever we sin against someone else, and especially when the sin is against God. May we see it as a sign of strength, not weakness; and may we see it as a first step on the bridge toward reconciliation and new life.

As I finish today, I want to leave you with an image to think about. One pastor, when preaching on apologizing, put a Band Aid in every person's bulletin. During the sermon, she asked everyone to take out that Band Aid and hold it in their hands and think – who is a person I have hurt, to whom do I owe an apology, what relationship do I need to heal by saying “I'm sorry”?

Now, clearly, there are no Band Aids in your bulletin today, but I would like to you to ask yourself those same questions this morning as you prepare to come before God's altar for communion. Is there someone you have hurt, someone to whom you need to apologize, a relationship that can start to be healed if you say “I'm sorry”? If so, I invite you when you come for communion to pray that that might happen. Ask God to give you the courage you need to say “I'm sorry.” And then go and do it. May it be so.

Amen.