



Plymouth Congregational Church
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FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT

OOPS! MY BAD!

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Luke 18: 9-14; Acts 3: 17-26

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to speak harshly about a particular situation or to criticize someone with whom you disagree, but how difficult it is to find just the right words to apologize?

This phenomenon really came to my awareness as I was raising my two children, especially as they came into their teen years. There seemed to be a constant power struggle in our home. They were either vying for attention, asking to do something that they were too young to do, or arguing over some household duty or some other trivial issue. Every so often, the words would get louder and insults would ring out. At that point, I would stop them, try to make the other be quiet as I got the story from both sides, sort out all the trivia and then ask them to apologize to each other. Every try that with teenagers?

You see, when they were small, I would make them “kiss and make up.” But as they grew, I could see that their sincerity was waning. So instead, I would ask them to think for a moment about what happened and then apologize to one another. I would wait while they gathered their thoughts – and wait....and wait.....

One day, after they had been harping at each other and began calling each other various and sundry names, I

asked them to look into each other's eyes and state what they had done, apologize, and after listening to the other person, to forgive them. You should have seen the horrified looks on their faces!

Again, I stood and waited....and waited.... and waited. Finally, I looked at them and shook my head and said, "Did you ever notice that mean words just seem to come pouring out so easily. But when you have to say the two most important words, you can't seem to find them in your vast vocabulary?" Heidi looked up and asked, "What words?" I said, "Think about it for a moment. What do you really need to say?" She rolled her eyes (Any of you have a teen do the eye roll?) and said, "I'm sorry." I told her, "Don't say them to me, although I will also accept them. Look at him and tell him." She looked over at Rob and said, "I'm sorry." I asked her, "For what?" She looked at her shoes and said, "I'm sorry for calling you names." I asked, "What are you asking him to do about it?" She said, "I guess I want him to forgive me." I smiled. But of course, then she added, "But I want him to stop calling me names too!"

Well, she had come that far, so I decided not to push it. I made Rob do the same thing and they certainly seemed to avoid doing that again. I noticed that there were times when they seemed to be looking awfully ugly at each other, but there seemed to be whispering a lot more!

I realize that day, however, that something was missing. I realized also how easy it is to forget. We come to worship each Sunday, we come to the Communion table or the Baptismal font and we say prayers, even prayers of confession and we are offered words of assurance. But there is something more that is supposed to happen here in the church of Jesus Christ. And if we are true followers of Jesus, in our secular lives as well.

Think of it. We go home, to work, to school, various places throughout our days and years. Sometimes we perform extraordinary tasks, helping others, we give money, time, talent to the church and other organizations. But we also fall short during those times. There are times when we

lose our tempers, when we ignore the needs of others, when we are downright mean to another person, perhaps even a person in our own family. And while we say, "I'm sorry. I was having a bad day." We are forgiven, yet something is missing. Something left unsaid.

Recently, I've been hearing young people repeat a particular phrase and it bothered me a bit. If you hang around junior high youngsters very often, you might hear this popular phrase. When someone does something that is offensive to another, the offender simply says, "Oops! My bad!" And with the wave of the hand of a laugh, it's supposed to be over.

Upon hearing this phrase used one day, I asked one of my colleagues, "What is this 'my bad' thing that I hear?" He said, "Oh, I guess it's that whatever it was I did, you're just supposed to let it go. Forget it." I said, "You mean, rather than say 'I'm sorry' you say that?" He said, "guess that's the gist of it - sounds pretty superficial to me." I agreed.

Now think of it. I realize we're busy and that our time is precious, but are we so pressed for time or too preoccupied with our own lives and needs that we no longer feel the need to say those two important words, "I'm sorry?" I'm sorry. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I said something that was not true or misled you. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me. I'm sorry you were frightened or insecure or whatever it might be. I'm sorry."

Have we become so accustomed to violence, abuse, harsh words and cursing in our society that we no longer notice? Do we not have a need to hear someone apologize? To offer forgiveness? Even God?

This is exactly the situation that Luke is addressing in his Gospel and the book of Acts through the words of Jesus. In the parable, Jesus is speaking to those who think they are better than everyone else. He is speaking to the Pharisees who seem to obey all the rules and regulations of the Temple, but treat their fellow members and community as though they are just property or slaves. And then there is one most hated in the community, the tax collector. He comes to the

Temple as well. But what happens? He bows his head in shame and says to God, "Be merciful. For I am a sinner."

How many of us are humble enough to say those words to God? To admit that while we try our best, we sometimes fall short of the mark. That is exactly what the word "sin" means. We say the words each Sunday morning of the prayer of Jesus. But did you know that the true translation of Jesus' words is not "trespasses" or even "debts" as has been recited for so many centuries. The true meaning of Jesus' words is actually this: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us." Forgive us for the times we have fallen short of God's expectations of us. Forgive us for falling short of our expectations of ourselves!" Forgive us as we forgive others.

Peter, in Luke's book, is emphasizing the power of God to forgive and even turn us into new persons, turning us from what he calls "wicked ways." But don't we first need to recognize that we do indeed sin and need forgiveness?

As I think back to my time raising my children, I still believe something was missing. Coming to this holy place is a beautiful reminder of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the opportunity for new life, new beginnings. In spite of sin or mistakes in our lives, we have an opportunity to recognize them through the gift of intelligence and emotion. We have the opportunity to apologize to those whom we might have harmed or neglected through the gift of speech. And they then have the opportunity to offer forgiveness and we can ask for God's forgiveness.

But there is one step still missing! Do you know what it is? The whole idea of confession is not only to admit and apologize, it is to make a covenant with God that as much as we are able, we will not do it again! What good is an apology to someone if we intend to keep on doing the same thing? If it happens over and over again, do we not begin to doubt the sincerity of their promise? Does not God begin to doubt our sincerity when we come again and again, asking for forgiveness for the very same sins?

Worship is our time as a congregation. It is a time to remind everyone present that all are welcome here – at the table, at our fellowship time, at our activities and projects. No one is left out. No one is turned away. But worship is also a time to make a new covenant. To recognize, apologize, ask for forgiveness and then promise that we will try harder. That we will do better.

When I spoke to my children about that issue, my son looked up and said, “But Mom, that’s the hardest part! Apologizing is tough. Sure. But promising not to do it again? I don’t know!”

Well, that’s why we come. We’re here to ask God to help us – to recognize those things in us that cause us to fall short – and then promise to try to do better. I think that’s a pretty good reason to be here. It’s a pretty good reason to read the Word – the wisdom. Don’t you? Amen.