

"I am sorry."

Three words that can heal a shattered soul.

And three words that can cause even the proudest to flinch.

Several months ago I was listening to a podcast by the social work researcher Brené Brown and psychologist Harriet Lerner.¹ Together, they talked about why apologies are so hard and what they call the 9 essential rules for a genuine apology.

The first rule of any meaningful apology is that it doesn't include the word 'but.' For example, "I'm sorry I hurt you...*but*, I was having a bad day."

Or, "I didn't mean to say it that way, but that's not what I meant."

"I'm sorry, but you really need to calm down."

Adding a but or any kind of condition only serves to invalidate an apology and make the aggrieved's feelings the problem and not the matter being discussed.

What they instead recommend doing is listening to the hurt and pain and thereby honoring the experience of the other person, even if you don't agree with their perspective. You can then discuss differing perspectives and ways to move forward after the hurt has been honored.

I've been trying to do that, and y'all, I won't lie: it's humbling and not my instinct.

It's hard not to soften the blow of our complicity, isn't it?

To have no excuse and only be left to say "I was wrong" reminds us of the depth of our power and ability to do harm—unconscious or not.

And let's be honest: in a world in which we have been conditioned to hide our flaws and put our best foot forward being honest about our mistakes or sins is often regarded as a sign of failure or unworthiness.

If we were to pause after each line of the confession today to dwell on things we have done and left undone, the laundry list might very well send us packing at the reality of human frailty.

It certainly wouldn't be good for our ego or sense of self.

¹ Brené Brown, "How to Apologize and Why it Matters," *Unlocking Us*, podcast audio, May 6, 2020, <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/harriet-lerner-and-brene-im-sorry-how-to-apologize-why-it-matters/>.

Keeping score, judging others, and minimizing our actions are much more fun and empowering.

It shores up our confidence.

It convinces us that we can just try harder and harder and harder until, Viola! We've reached peak self-actualization and goodness.

But what if we knew—*really knew* in our gut—that we could list everything we have ever done and God would still come running out to crown us with love and compassion as the Psalmist sang?

Maybe then the default wouldn't be to add a condition to our apologies or make excuses for ourselves.

What if we didn't have to doctor up what we have failed to do or what we keep doing without any kind of desperate justification because we trusted in the value of honesty and humility, the values of Jesus?

Perhaps our limitations would not be things we strive to conquer à la our own personal version of the Amazing Race. Instead, our limitations could be places through which we can reach out to God and to others and find peace in interdependence and not self-sufficiency and the illusion of independence.

And, what if our only option was to face ourselves and God without pretense or reservation so that God could wipe the dirt off of our faces, clean the slate, and declare us—declare *you*—worthy and still very much in the game like everyone else?

Instead of feeble attempts at trying to even the score or pay back God, we might instead find ourselves inhabiting the freedom of no longer trying to be sure that others get their just desserts, too.

Above all,

what if the crown of “not enough” were traded in for the crown of love and faithfulness, as the Psalmist sang? *Perhaps the mercy we receive but don't deserve would overflow into mercy with others, because we can't begin to forgive others—truly forgive—(and let go of any desire for retribution, blaming, or shaming) until we embrace what God pours out endlessly upon ourselves.*

Here's the thing: Jesus came to make these “what ifs” what *is*.

We cannot begin to hear Jesus' words in the Gospel lesson this morning until we first claim the words of the Psalm. Otherwise the parable's ending that "God will do the same to you if you don't forgive" will sound like a threat of divine retribution when in reality Jesus' one-two parable punch are his way of "playing out that 'eye for an eye' mindset to its logical extreme.

*It's God saying, 'You want to play the tit-for-tat game? OK, fine, we'll play that game. But in that game, you always lose. You end up being tortured for life if you really want to hold everyone completely accountable for all their sins. And that's exactly why I sent my Son to bring the message of grace to you: because you can never win if it's all about meticulously keeping track of who owes you what. Because the bottom line is, you owe me everything.'*²

And yet...I forgive you for everything, not because you are blameless or sinless, but because by virtue of being made in my image and being forever united with me through Jesus' victory over the very things that once could have driven a wedge between us, you are forgiven and made worthy.

The kingdom that Jesus came to set in motion doesn't prevent us from earning our way to goodness through niceness and pride and revenge. The path forward is only through humility and honesty and seeing ourselves in the same desperate need of forgiveness and mercy as the next person.

Friends, I know it's hard, I do; but, that is the foundation for which we strive to make the same journey with others.

What if this week, just for this week—or, even for the next 24-48—hours you and I stood face to face with who we are—prior to the achievements and successes and skills and defensive mechanisms and egos and basked in the glow of God's forgiveness? What if that, along with the love of Holy Week we talked about last week
were
our breath,
our currency,
and our language?

Might we then love ourselves as God loves us? Might we then see others as God sees them and walk that long and honestly sometimes uncomfortable but ultimately liberating road to forgiveness and thus reconciliation?

² Tracy J. Wells Miller, part of an online discussion on Matthew 18:21-35, September 15, 2017.

We are all sailing in a sea of endless grace.³

Twelve years ago, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, CNN did a story about several New Orleans' residents left homeless by the storm's wake. They had traveled from shelter to shelter looking for a place to rest when a reporter found them walking along the interstate. The reporter talked to one young woman who said that her father lived hundreds of miles away in the Midwest, but they had a falling out years ago, and she had run South instead. "She asked if she could use the reporter's cell phone to get in touch with someone to them know she and friends were okay. The reporter obliged and the woman called her father back in the Midwest. They had not spoken in some time, bridges having been burned and all. But he answered the phone. 'Daddy, I'm OK,' she said. Then she burst out into tears, 'I don't know how we're going to get out of here! I'm so scared!' They exchanged just a few words before she hung up the phone. The reporter asked, 'what did he say?'

'He said he's coming down right away to pick us up.'"⁴

And so it is with God—
refusing to keep score
even when we do,
and
Giving you a crown of glory and love
in exchange for a crown of thorns
and setting you free.

The Rev. Dr. Maria Alexandria Kane
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD
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³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 214.

⁴ As recounted by Wallace W. Bubar, "Pastoral Perspective (Psalm 103)" *Feasting on the Word*, v. 12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 58, 60.