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The Well Played Life: Sorry!

Sorry! One simple word that is incredibly important and complicated in our relationships! There are some who overuse this word, and some who under-use it... both of which effectively water down the heart of this powerful word of apology and forgiveness seeking. We are all too familiar with the fauxpology... apologies that are not genuine, but are said simply to make an awkward situation go away, or even to cause more emotional harm... Have you heard, or ever said, some of these fauxpologies? "I'm sorry your feelings got hurt." or "If you think I was wrong, then I'm sorry..." or "If you feel that way, I'm sorry, can't we just move on..." These are all versions of "Sorry, but..." While they express sympathy or regret, they avoid taking responsibility for one's actions or behaviors, and the impact they had on others. Essentially they're saying, "I'm sorry YOU feel or think a certain way, but I'm not sorry for what I said or did."

Or how about those times that you have been really hurt by someone else and you are waiting for them to apologize to you... Often as we wait, we simmer in our own hurt feelings, getting more and more upset, or even talking with others about the one who hurt us. And then the next time we run into that person, all we can do is project a single thought, "You owe me an apology!"

Generally, as a culture, we are not very good at saying we're sorry, and meaning it! It's like one of my childhood favorite games has subconsciously worked its way into our relationships and interactions. I'm sure many of us have played the game "Sorry!", and if you're like me, you never noticed how ridiculous the game title is... especially the subtitle... "The game of sweet revenge." Revenge is not exactly the first thing that comes to mind when I think of a true apology... The general principle of the game is to work your way out of start, move your game pieces around the board, all the way back to your home... once all four of your tokens are home, you win... but of course it's not that easy. In the game of Sorry, rather than dice, you have cards that dictate how you can move your pieces... cards like;

- 4 – Move backward four spaces
- 11 – Move eleven spaces forward or switch places with an opponent
- 10 – Move ten spaces forward or one space backwards
- 7 – Move seven spaces forward or split move between two pieces
- and of course, the SORRY! card that allows you to exchange your game piece for someone else's, and in doing so, send them back to start, back to the beginning.

The irony of this game is that you are shouting "Sorry!" as you gleefully knock someone back – rarely if ever really sorry... for if you were, you would never win the game!

While playing the board game Sorry!, authentic apologies are few and far between, but in real life, when we are trying to maintain healthy relationships, true apologies are not only necessary, but they're faithful. True, authentic apologies start with being able to recognize when you're in the wrong, having the courage to admit it, and if you're being true to your words, taking actions to rectify the harm done and work toward change in the future. A true apology indicates a desire to change one's behaviors, not simply communicate sorrow or compassion for hurt feelings.

Our scriptures are full of relationship advice, especially when it comes to hurt feelings. When we have the wisdom and courage to admit that we are in the wrong, that we have caused harm to God, another person, or anything within God's good creation, we are called to repent of our sin, to ask for forgiveness, turn away from wrongdoing, turning back to God and others. In our Old Testament, prophets were sent to guide people away from sinful behaviors and attitudes and turn them back toward God. In the New Testament, John the Baptist invited people into a baptism of repentance, washing away the sins of the past and living into right relationships in the future. Jesus continued on his work, and took it to the next level – lifting up the ancient teachings of forgiveness and adding to them.

In our gospel reading today, we hear people asking Jesus about how many times they must forgive someone who wrongs them... Our story follows on the heels of Jesus instructing his listeners in a three-step process for seeking reconciliation with someone who has wronged you... on the first offense, you speak to them privately. If it happens again, take a friend with you as a witness to the conversation. If it happens a third time, bring the matter to the council of the church and ask for their help in seeking justice. So three sounds fair, right? No, Jesus says... forgive and then forgive again... 70X7 times... essentially unlimited forgiveness, just as God's mercy for you is limitless.

There are two concepts here that are challenging to hold together... justice and mercy. When someone has wronged us, we're all about justice --- remember, "you OWE me an apology!" speaking in terms of balances and an account that needs reconciling. But when we are the ones in the wrong, when we are the ones apologizing, it's mercy we seek. Jesus speaks of this challenge in the story this morning as we hear of the servant, who begs for mercy for an exorbitant debt, asking for more time to repay what he owes, and the king grants him full pardon, wiping away the entirety of his debt, giving him a clean slate. But when he in turn encounters someone who owes him a comparatively small debt, he seeks justice and reparation, throwing the man in debtor's prison until the debt is paid in full. When the king hears of this man's unmerciful actions, he overturns his pardon and throws the man into prison, torturing him until he could repay his full debt.

In his teaching about forgiveness, Jesus leans toward mercy – encouraging us to be merciful, as our God is merciful with us. Mercy is not simply something to desire for ourselves, but to give to others as well. If we're being honest though, what makes mercy a little easier to live out is when there is true repentance for wrong-doing. When an apology rings true – not like the fauxpologies we heard earlier.

Dr Gary Chapman and Dr, Jennifer Thomas completed a two-year research project where they noted that different people look for different aspects in an apology. They

identified what they called the "Five Languages of Apology." They noted that the average apology only has one or two of these aspects in it, so when one attempts to say they are sorry, the other person may feel it is insincere, even when it's meant in truth. In our culture of watered-down apologies, it is not enough to be sincere in your words, you must be sincere in the way you live out your apology. The 5 aspects of a sincere apology are:

A. Expressing Regret - identifying with the emotions of the other person. We clearly state that we know that our wrong behavior has hurt them deeply. The focus comes off of us and goes to the effect we've had on the other person.

B. Accepting Responsibility - This is saying the "W" word - "I was wrong." Here you name what you did wrong, accept fault and clearly state it was wrong without any excuses. I say this is the prime meaning of the word "confession" in the Bible. "I should not have done that. There's no excuse. What I did was wrong."

C. Making Restitution - Restitution is seeking to restore what was lost – it is to compensate for injury. This is always an action step. "What could I do to make this right? How can I make amends to you? How could I restore your confidence in me?"

D. Genuinely Repenting - Not only do we recognize our actions are wrong, but then we seek to live differently – to go the other way and change one's behavior. This is also an action step, but the actions are aimed at decreasing the temptation for wrong or increasing the chance to do good.

E. Requesting forgiveness - The final aspect they call requesting Forgiveness: "Will you please forgive me?" The focus here is true humility. One is asking for forgiveness with no demands, no bargaining, & no getting upset if they don't immediately grant it.

Apologies, "remind us that people can make mistakes and recover from them, that values once ignored can be reestablished, that a relationship can be healed." There are some people who think that apologies are a sign of weakness. Personally, I think that apologies are a sign of strength. It is incredibly hard to take responsibility for an error in judgment. It is hard to admit faults to ourselves and even tougher to admit them to others.

My prayer for us, in all of our relationships, is that we will find a spirit of courage and strength to apologize when we are in the wrong, a heart of mercy to forgive ourselves and others for mistakes, and the wisdom to know when reconciliation is possible. May we not only expect and rely on mercy for ourselves, but give it out to others as well.