

## **Sorry, not Sorry!**

Today we begin a month-long series prompted by different games, and today's game is Sorry! I should state up front that I did not grow up in a game playing family. I did, however, marry into one. My family occasionally joined in a game of Go Fish or Clue, but we never went all-in with board games or cards. My husband's family has spent many evenings playing dominos, scrabble, and Yahtzee, just to name a few. And you haven't played Sorry! until you have played with Mamaw, my husband's grandmother. When we were dating, Dave took me to Hamilton, Ohio to meet Mamaw. We went to her favorite restaurant, attended a local street fair, and we played Sorry! around the table in Mamaw's kitchen. I don't know that I have ever seen anyone's eyes twinkle the way hers did when she declared, "Sorry!" and sent my pitiful pawn back to the start. As you probably know, the point of Sorry! the game is to get your four pieces home before the other players, and if you draw the Sorry! card, you can swap places with an opponent and send them back to square one. And you get to declare "Sorry!" with as much gusto as you choose.

As you may know the name of the game ends with an exclamation point. I'm not sure I normally associate exclamation points with apologies. When I exclaim "Sorry!" in the game, I'm really not all that apologetic. And when I say sorry in real life, I certainly do not exclaim it like I do in the game, unless that is when I say it as a way to end and win an argument. Apologies are not easy, whether we're apologizing to a loved one, to a stranger, or to God, for that matter. And yet apologies are crucial and faithful in every relationship.

When I planned this month's series, I didn't intentionally plan to follow a sermon exploring Jonah's anger and ours for that matter with a sermon on confession and apologies, on what happens after the blow up, after the words are said. And yet, here we are. This morning's second reading comes from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' instructions for the community being shaped in his name. [Matthew 5:21-26]

Of course, you've heard the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." And I'm guessing you'll agree with me that the saying is dead wrong. Names do hurt, deeply. Name-calling dehumanizes the person being mocked. Name-calling damages the person being belittled AND the one doing the belittling, and name-calling damages the community as a whole, fraying the fabric of our life together and undermining our witness to the world about who Jesus is. Jesus knows this. So, he declares, that it is not enough for us not to murder someone; Jesus intends for the Body of Christ to be marked by reconciliation and peace rather than vengeance and hostility. Oops. Sorry, Jesus. Something tells me that is not how a random person on the street might describe the Christian family these days.

This text offers us some hope, however. Jesus has high ideals and big expectations, setting the bar even higher than the Pharisees do. Jesus is also a realist. As one scholar Eugene Boring points out, Jesus is intent on helping:

The disciples apply [his] radical demand in the 'between-the-times' situation of imperfect people living in an imperfect world. *They are to consider reconciliation, overcoming alienation and hostility to be even more important than worship at the altar.*<sup>1</sup>

As I said last week, not all anger is wrong. Anger can be a powerful force propelling us toward God's vision of justice. The trick it seems is not to denigrate, demonize, or dismiss other children of God along the way. And when we do—when, not if—we are to commit ourselves to reconciling, to apologizing and asking for forgiveness.

Boring also points out that Jesus' words about stopping in the midst of worship to make amends is a bit unrealistic, too. Matthew's context presumes worship at the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. Pilgrims traveled many miles over the course of many days to go worship in the Temple. For some it was an annual trek. For others it might have been a once-in-a-lifetime journey. The author would not argue that Jesus literally meant for the worshiper to drop her offering mid-worship and head back to her hometown to mend her relationship

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 190, emphasis added.

with her next-door neighbor before coming back to the Temple. That said, there is an expectation that we get our relationships on healthier footing before we get gussied up for Sunday morning in our favorite pew or pulpit. Which means learning to say we're sorry. And mean it.

I recently stumbled across a blog entitled "SorryWatch." The authors, Marjorie Ingall and Susan McCarthy analyze public apologies and write about what they read and hear. Their analysis is based on studies that look at the science of apologies and the importance of apologizing in creating and sustaining healthy relationships and communities. In an interview last week, Ms. Ingall commented:

We have been inundated in our lifetimes with terrible apologies in television and movies. From 'Love Story' ['Love means never having to say you're sorry.'] to the character of Fonzie in 'Happy Days,' who couldn't stop stuttering when he tried to say the word "sorry" to John Wayne's famous line in the movie 'She Wore a Yellow Ribbon' ("Never apologize, mister; it's a sign of weakness.").<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, there have been multiple articles and posts of late about people who over-apologize, the ones who say "sorry" early and often. Maybe you know those people. Maybe you *are* one of those people. That kind of *sorry* doesn't do much for repairing relationships, either.

So how am I going to apologize well and faithfully, when—not if, but when—I hurt someone? Ingall and McCarthy have ideas:

One of the most important aspects of a good apology is the intent. 'Many times, people apologize so they can move on rather than mend the hurt they caused,' explains Ingall.

According to Ingall and McCarthy, a sincere apology requires two main components:

- Taking responsibility and owning up to wrongdoing (whether intentional or not)
- Keeping the recipient's feelings at the forefront

McCarthy explains, 'A sincere apology doesn't include justification of your actions. Instead, it should be, "I did something terrible to you and you didn't deserve that," period.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Randi Mazzella, <https://www.nextavenue.org/sorry-there-are-many-good-reasons-to-apologize>

<sup>3</sup> Mazzella

A good apology, they insist, doesn't expect immediate forgiveness. Instead, it compels the wrongdoer to see how and if she can make amends. <sup>4</sup>

A little over a month ago, Emma Irvine was deciding how to respond to a robbery at her bakery, Sweet Something, her life's work:

On May 26, a man who appeared to be in his 20s showed up at Sweet Something around 3 a.m. and stayed outside for about 30 minutes...Then, he kicked the front door, shattering the glass and crouched through the hole he created to enter the shop, police said.

Inside, the man sat down for a few minutes, got up to use the bathroom, tried to mop away the broken glass fragments from the door and took selfies on the store's cellphone, surveillance video showed.

After staying for about 30 minutes, the man grabbed six chocolate champagne cupcakes from the fridge — worth about \$30 — and departed.<sup>5</sup>

In the thick of dealing with the damage, filing a claim with her insurance, and working with law enforcement, Ms. Irvine felt a bit of sympathy for the thief in his effort to sweep up the glass shards. She also kept her sense of humor:

The thief wore orange sunglasses in the three selfies he captured. Trying to joke about the situation, Irvine baked sugar cookies in the shape of orange sunglasses...She placed the cookies on top of chocolate champagne cupcakes and marketed them to customers as 'Crime of Passion' cupcakes.<sup>6</sup>

So maybe Irvine was already primed to receive an apology when the robber called to speak to her on the phone. Over the course of ten minutes, he apologized for what he called a dumb mistake and he said he would pay for the damaged door, and for the cupcakes:

Irvine asked police not to press charges. 'I had a lot of empathy and sympathy for this guy,' [she] said.

'You can tell that he's a young kid who made a mistake, and we all make mistakes.' ....

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<sup>4</sup> <https://sorrywatch.com/making-kids-apologize-cuppa-comme-ci-comme-ca/>

<sup>5</sup> Kyle Melnick, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/06/02/vancouver-canada-sweet-something-burglarized/>

<sup>6</sup> Melnick

‘It kind of closed the chapter...You humanize the person on the other end of it. It’s not very common that somebody calls in and says, “I’m sorry I did that.”’....

‘One decision does not make a person,’ Irvine said. ‘He might have done a wrong thing, but he did everything right after that.’<sup>7</sup>

*He did everything right after that.* A mistake, an injury followed by a genuine and heartfelt apology. Thread by thread, stitch by stitch a tear in the fabric of community is mended.

On the cusp of our nation’s 247<sup>th</sup> birthday, apologies on a grand scale are a fraught conversation, stoking anger on every side. It is hard to even consider apologizing for something as sweeping as centuries of slavery or dwelling on land that once belonged to an indigenous people, let alone making amends in a material way. I don’t have a magic wand, nor do I have the wisdom to know how to solve all the things on a grand scale. I do know this: The pain and suffering are real, and the wounds are deep. I also know that grudges, defensiveness, name-calling, and resentment are not fruits of the Spirit, nor will they ever contribute in a helpful way toward the coming of Christ’s kingdom or the sacred healing of communities. I cannot control whether someone will forgive me. I can have some control over how I live and move and have my being in the world. I can resist the urge to label and name-call, as well as the urge to dismiss or disparage another person, another child of God. I can learn how to listen to someone’s anger and pain, even when that pain makes me uncomfortable, even when I can do very little if anything to heal that pain. And I can learn how to apologize when I need to.

In a moment we will come not to the altar, but to the table. We don’t have an altar in the Presbyterian church. Jesus’ sacrifice was a one-time event. He gave his life to save ours on that first awful Good Friday over two thousand years ago. Because God is gracious, we are forgiven. The grace of God comes before us and trails after us. We are called to live as faithfully as we can in response to that grace. At this table we remember that meal around a table in an upper room and we look forward to God’s kingdom come when every tear in the

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<sup>7</sup> Melnick

fabric of the human family is mended once and for all. As we prepare to come to the table, I want to invite us to try something, to examine ourselves before sharing in the bread and the cup as Paul encourages.<sup>8</sup> You received slips of paper when you arrived. As you feel so led, I invite you to pause for a moment and think of someone you have wronged, someone you've called a name out loud or under your breath, someone you need to apologize to. That someone may be a loved one or a public figure. That someone may even be you. What would it look like to say you're sorry to them? How would it feel to sew one tiny stitch in mending our ever-so-frayed human fabric? Write what you choose—if you choose—on the slips of paper. They are yours to do with as you wish. If you would like to place them in the offering plate or in the basket when you come forward as a way of handing them over to God, you may. Or you may tuck them in your pocket or your purse and take them with you.

I still plan to play Sorry! when I get the chance. There is something hopeful and healing about sitting around a table and playing a game where everyone knows the rules and plays by those rules. Laughter and fun are crucial stitches in this work of mending and tending the human fabric. I hope I'll also find a way to say "sorry," when I need to—without fanfare, without an exclamation point. I hope we all will. And as we do, as we practice mending what we can, when we can, and where we can, may we know and trust that the God we meet in Jesus, the Savior of the world, stands ever ready to forgive us, to mend us, and to change us, even as he works tirelessly to make us and all things new and whole.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:28