

The Significance of Saying “I’m Sorry”

Sermon text: Ezra 3:1-7

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I. Admitting an apology would be apt

Do you know anyone who has a hard time saying “I’m sorry?” Is there a person in your life who has difficulty admitting when he or she is wrong? Can you think of someone for whom making an apology seems as if it’s one of life’s greatest challenges?

I’ve known someone like that and I’ve observed how an unwillingness to admit when we do wrong can damage a relationship. Believe it or not, the situation I’m referring to happened in church! It didn’t happen here, but incidents like this one could happen almost anywhere. The setting was a Wednesday evening meal in fellowship hall. The adults were just finishing dinner, but the younger children who were present had eaten faster and they were already running around playing tag with one another.

One of the adults wanted to talk to one of the pre-school children who was running and playing. The man wasn’t related to the child, but he was trying to get the little guy’s attention. So the adult balled up some aluminum foil and tossed it toward the little boy. Just by chance, the foil ball plunked the kid right in the head. It probably hurt just a little, but it startled him more than anything so he started crying – loudly.

It just so happened that the boy’s mother observed the whole incident. Of course, her son came running over to her crying and she tried to comfort him. She carried the child over to the man who had thrown the ball of foil so he could make his apologies to help the little guy get over the incident. To the mother’s shock and then anger, the man denied throwing the ball of foil. Even though she had seen the whole thing, the man refused to admit that he had done something wrong that made the little boy cry. Can you imagine that?

What do you think happened to the relationship between the man and the boy’s mother? Right – it was strained to say the least. Sometimes we have a difficult time saying “I’m sorry” and that can have a negative impact on our relationships. The same thing is true in our relationship with God. When we say things or do things or think things or live in ways that are displeasing to the Lord, we sin against God. When that happens, we need to admit that we’ve wronged our heavenly Father and say “I’m sorry.”

It sounds like a simple thing, but it’s actually a big deal because for a long time people have had a tough time admitting when we mess up. That was the case for the people of Judah in the years leading up to the destruction of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians. They were giving lip service to their faith in the one true God, but their thoughts and actions and lifestyles said something completely different. They were living as if the Lord didn’t even exist.

God sent prophets to call the people to turn back to their faith in him, but they didn’t listen. They couldn’t admit they were doing wrong. The Lord tried to get their attention more than once, but they didn’t think they needed to say “I’m sorry” to God. So he removed his

protection from his covenant people and allowed the Babylonians to conquer them and destroy their land, including the capitol city of Jerusalem with its temple.

The Lord used the exile in Babylon as a “wake-up call” for many of his people. So when King Cyrus of Persia offered to allow the Jewish exiles to return to Judah and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, there were 50,000 of them who took him up on his offer. As we’ve been learning in our study of Ezra, when the people arrived back in Judah and Jerusalem they encountered a devastated land, a destroyed city, and a temple that was little more than a pile of rubble.

As we turn our attention to Ezra 3 this morning, we find out something about the priorities of the exiles that returned. They hadn’t been back long – just a few months, just long enough to get themselves into some semblance of a home where they could live. Keep in mind – most of the people had to live in the towns outside Jerusalem because the city was still uninhabitable.

But in the seventh month, that is, in the September/October timeframe, the people gathered in Jerusalem under the leadership of the priest, Jeshua, and the governor, Zerubbabel, to rebuild the altar of the Lord on the site of the temple. It may not be obvious from just reading the first few verses of Ezra 3 that this act was a huge deal, but it was. What the people were saying to the Lord when they re-established daily morning and evening sacrifices on the altar at the temple site was: “We’re sorry – we admit that we have said and done and thought things that are wrong in your eyes, O God. And we want to apologize. You are the Lord. We rely on your grace, your mercy, and your protection. Forgive us and help us live for you every day.”

That’s what was going on when the Jews who returned from exile in Babylon restarted the offering of daily sacrifices to God on the rebuilt altar where the temple had stood in Jerusalem before the exile. They were saying “I’m sorry” to the Lord.

II. Confession is still good for the soul

If you have been here at Church of the Palms, worshipping in the sanctuary for any period of time, then you have probably noticed that there is an entire section of every service entitled: “We Confess.” Each week we are called to confession before God and each other. It is a time when we admit that we have sinned and missed the mark of how the Lord intends for us to live as followers of Jesus. Each week we join our voices together in prayer of confession that lifts up some facet of how we’ve displeased God. In other words, each week we have the opportunity to say “I’m sorry” to our heavenly Father.

It happened just a few minutes ago this morning. I hope you noticed the time of confession when it went by, because we don’t want to fall into the pattern of just going through the motions of confession like the Jews did before the exile in offering daily sacrifices that ceased to have any real significance in their lives. Our passage this morning from Ezra 3 reminds that confession is good for the soul – it was when the former exiles re-established the altar on the site of the temple, and it still is for us today.

Perhaps today, especially today, on this 4th of July weekend, we need to confess the way we’ve taken so many of the freedoms and comforts and blessings that God pours out upon us and

our nation for granted. Perhaps we've fallen into the same trap that the people of Judah did before the exile in thinking that the Lord would always protect them no matter how far they wandered from living out their faith in him. We may need to say "I'm sorry" to God.

Perhaps today, especially today, on this communion Sunday, we need to examine ourselves and admit the ways we've personally fallen short of living in a manner that honors the Lord and blesses other people. We may have to admit that we gossip about people: we say things about them that we wouldn't say to them. We may have to admit that we've been less than honest in our work or in our relationships. We may have to admit that we've hurt others by what we've said and done. In other words, we may need to say "I'm sorry" to someone.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, verses 23-24, Jesus said: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Jesus reminds his followers that saying "I'm sorry" to one another is a precondition for coming before God.

The Apostle Paul says something very similar in his teaching about partaking of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, beginning in verse 27:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

Friends, Paul isn't saying not to partake of the Lord's Supper. He's saying to be sure to examine ourselves first, then to receive these signs of the body and blood of Christ. This is the time to say "I'm sorry" to God and to one another, so we can receive this sacrament of grace with gratitude in our hearts. Let us sing as we prepare to come to the table.