“I am sorry”….these are probably one of the most powerful phrase that one could say to another person. Whether it is between a husband and a wife, a child to a parent or a friend to a friend, these three simple words can really mean a lot. It implies one’s admition of guilt while acknowledging that something is not right and it needs to be fixed and it takes someone to initiate that effort. It calls upon an act of grace, forgiveness and reconciliation from one party to another. Unfortunately, as much as we would like to hear these three simple words being said, they are often not spoken frequently enough of.

For those of you who are parents or have worked with children certainly know the importance of teaching our children to say “I am sorry” when the child has done something wrong. This is all part of growing up! However, these three simple words “I am sorry” are also the hardest for anyone to say, regardless of what age you may be, whether you are an adult or a child.

When I was in seminary, as part of our curriculum requirement, we needed to take 6 units of classes from the Practical Theology department. One of the electives that I took for the entire semester was a class dealing with “Conflict Management”. This was not just any kind of “conflict management”, but one that deals specifically with people within the context of the church. We often joke that church and conflicts are synonymous and inseparable to each other. I think we can all agree on this. Because whenever 2 or 3 are gathered together, they will undoubtedly have different opinions and ideas on certain things and how they want to go about carrying out various tasks. We are challenged to say “I am sorry”….to say what we mean, and mean what we say.

As Presbyterians, we do take great pride of our diversities of voices and perspectives. We celebrate our differences in the spirit of unity within the body of Christ. We confess that conflicts are inevitable but there are ways in which we can deal with them healthily and constructively. Do you know that about 1/3 of the Presbyterian Church’s constitution - the *Book of Order* is specifically devoted to “Church Disciplines”? This section of our constitution outlines ways in which we can deal with disagreement and conflicts in a decent and an orderly fashion. How are we going to go about handling our differences with one another, in a Christ-like manner? Christ commanded us to live peaceably and in harmony with one another. Christ calls us into community even when we disagree with one another or if a sin has been committed against the other. If we have any disagreements or hold grudges against one another, we shall seek the other party involved through peace, harmony and unity in the Spirit.

As the Apostle Paul reminded the early church in Ephesus that *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

What makes us Christian different from those who are “outside” the body of Christ, is not that we never get into a fight, disagree, argument or hurt one another’s feelings, but how we go about addressing and resolving our differences…in Christ’s love and humility. **When we enter into membership in a Christian community, we bind ourselves to one another with Christ as our head.** We take great risks in forming relationships with others outside of our comfort zones, our gender, our nationality, our language, our ethnicity or socioeconomic status. We embrace one another in spite of who we are and what our varying opinions may be. The overcoming of such differences is what distinguishes us from the rest of the world, which constructs around sameness, comformity, and uniformity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In our Gospel lesson that we read earlier taken from Matthew, Jesus addressed the very issue of how we, as a Christian community, ought to behave with one another, especially those whom we disagree or have committed sins against. Fellowship in Christ requires constant and boundless forbearance, forgiving of one another “70x7” times. It calls upon this unconditional love…even to the person whom you hated or hurt you the most. When we all take a step back and try to listen to what the others have to say, we all took a giant leap forward towards a more hospitable and beloved community.

In our passage today, Christ outlined series of steps for believers to undertake in hope of healing and restoring the body – a body that still bear too many wounded scars and broken hearts. Jesus was reminding us that we ought to extend our compassionate hearts, our listening ears and commitment to prayers for one another, even to those who hurt our feelings or gossiped behind our backs. We do so before seeking judgment and disciplines with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Last weekend, I was attending an ecumenical conference. The theme of the conference was building a healthy and spiritual relationship among ourselves and with God. This was a time when we lay aside our denominational differences and legalism and focus on Christ and his reconciling love alone. There was a time during the conference when we dedicated a time for prayers and personal confessions. The plenary speaker challenged us and walked us through series of “listening” exercise, as we learned how to be better listeners rather than “talkers” and respecting the views of others and not quickly coming to judgment and attempting to fix the other person’s problems. In order for this to work, we must be completely honest with ourselves and with God.

It’s ok that we express our emotion of how we feel deep inside. God desires us to come to Him and draw from the Living Water, even when we feel don’t like it….when we feel that the whole world is against us. Like the Samaritan woman who came to the well, that we read a couple of weeks ago, even though she was ostracized by her community, she still came devotedly to the well every day, even during the hottest part of the day, in spite of her background and her unconfessed sins against God and others.

God is willing to meet us right where we are and extend God’s grace upon us. In turn, God expects us to pass along that same grace with our fellow brothers and sisters, reserving our judgment and seeking God’s reconciling love and forgiveness towards one another.

Just as we pray in our Lord’s Prayer, “*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who’ve sinned against us”* We’ve all prayed this prayer countless of times. We’ve all committed this to our hearts I’m sure, but yet it is one of the most difficult commands for us to put into practice? It’s a two part petition - asking God to forgive our own shortcomings, AS we forgive those who have sinned against us.

In the other passage that we read earlier together, the Apostle Paul reminded us to *“lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”[[3]](#footnote-3)* **Lay aside the desires of our flesh and the earthly temptations while focus ourselves on Christ and Christ alone. This is an important reminder of ourselves that we are all imperfect people who deserve condemnation and judgment, but because of God’s unconditional grace, we are being reconciled by God…and we are commissioned to reconcile with others.**

**One of my ministry colleague friends – the Rev. Jin S. Kim, commented on this very same passage in Matthew in light of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ in the world today. He wrote “*the church is not fundamentally an institution or a denomination, but any place where two or three or more people live together in mutual interdependence under Christ. This requires casting off the yoke of individualism, which results in alienation, loneliness, anxiety, and distrusts, into a profound trust of and commitment to people different from ourselves. This means that there will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how we bind and loose one another appropriately.****[[4]](#footnote-4)* **We can therefore celebrate and bear this freedom that we have in Christ and not be constraint by our sins anymore.**

In a moment, we will once again come before this table of grace. Whenever 2 or 3 are gathered, Christ meets us right where we are, at this table. We bear witness to God’s calling in our lives as we feast in God’s fellowship and presence. Undeservingly we come, in spite of our shortcomings and our sins committed against one another and against God. Through Christ, **we come to experience God’s presence whenever two or three are gathered in God’s name, and wherever we experience the reality of human brokenness and the absence of grace.** And this is the place where we have been called. This is the place where we can honestly come before God and say that “We are sorry!” as we seek God’s forgiveness and mercy.

When 2 or 3 are gathered, we come to experience the fullness of the body and who God is! Come, for all those who are ready. Come and seek God in God’s presence, Amen!

1. *Ephesians 4:2-3* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kim, Jin S *Feasting on the Word* Year A, Vol 3, p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Romans 13:12* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Kim, Jin S. Year A Volume 3, p. 48* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)