“I am sorry”. These three words are probably the hardest and yet the most powerful words that anyone could say to someone else, perhaps even harder than “I love you”. Whether it is between spouses, from a child to a parent or from a friend to a friend, these three simple words can really mean a lot, if someone truly means it from his or her heart. When someone says he or she is sorry, it implies one’s admission of remorse and in need of repentance, while seeking to be forgiven by the others involved.

Unfortunately, we have a tendency to cast blames upon someone else, and never upon ourselves. It’s always someone’s fault! And we’ve seen that even since the first human sin with Adam and Eve at the Garden of Eden. The failure of not admitting our own fault, in my opinion, is more problematic than the act itself. As I mentioned earlier, even Jesus illustrated this problem in a parable that we only see the specks in our neighbors’ eyes, while we fail to see the log in our own.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When I was in seminary, I took an elective course in “Conflict Management” as part of the Practical Ministry curriculum. This wasn’t just any kind of “conflict management”, but one that deals specifically with people within the context of the church. The instructor was a seasoned pastor who has dealt with many levels and types of conflicts within the church. Now, you would think church is the last place where we would find conflicts among the people, right? Well, think again! As a matter of fact, conflicts and church are almost synonymous to one another. Where there are people, there will be conflicts. Unfortunately that’s just part of human nature. There have been more disputes, divisive arguments, scornful exchange of words and bitterness, or even physical confrontation among Christians, even among those who are in leadership.

A couple of years ago, I was called upon by a fellow seminary classmate to go to his church and serve as the mediator of a dispute that an elder was having with the senior pastor. Without going into the specifics, the conflict was really over trivial matters, in my opinion. It should’ve and could’ve been resolved among themselves, if they had better communication with one another and if each party would set aside their egos. But unfortunately, the situation ballooned to a point of no-return and both side refused to take a step back and were unwilling to listen to what the others have to say. I guess that’s when the mediator would into place. Furthermore, the conflict was extrapolated by small talks, gossips, spreading of rumors, misinterpretation, or cultural misunderstanding among other members of the congregation. They began to take sides and various camps and alliances were formed. At the end, a number of members, including the elder who made such complaints, decided to leave the congregation all together. It was indeed unfortunate and sad to see incident like this to occur, but it happens in almost every congregations.

What does that say about the nature of the faith community in which we have been called? What model shall we be seeking to strive or what lesson can we learn, the next time we find ourselves in conflict with someone else, especially among another brother or sister in Christ?

Whenever 2 or 3 are gathered, there will inevitably be differences in our opinions and ideas on how certain things are to be done. None of us are expected to agree on everything, because God has made us all uniquely different from one another. The real challenge for us is how can we overcome our differences and still be able to come to a consensus through the prayerful discernment of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of unity of the body? How can we seek a “win-win” solution, while putting aside the “**I win; You lose**” attitude whenever our differences arise? Are we willing to put aside our personal agenda and let the Holy Spirit speak before us for the benefit of the larger body?

 As Presbyterians, we do take great pride of our diversities, not only of our backgrounds but also our different voices and perspectives on almost every subject under the sun. Conflicts may be inevitable but at the end we seek solutions in which we can deal with healthily and constructively.

Do you know that in the *Book of Order,* which is one of the constitutional documents of the Presbyterian Church, nearly 1/3 of it deals specifically with “Church Disciplines”? It outlines ways and procedures in which we can handle various forms of disagreement and conflicts, not only in an orderly and decent fashion, but also in a Christ-like and constructive manner as well.

As Christ commanded us to live peaceably and in harmony with one another, even when we disagree with one another, we shall seek the other party out through peaceful means, and not talk behind the others’ back, engage in gossips, or spread rumors against one another, which does greater harm than good to the body of Christ.

As the Apostle Paul reminded the early church in Ephesus that was just as divisive as the church today 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.[[2]](#footnote-2)*** Bear with one another in LOVE. **Give LOVE a chance**!

As one theologian commented on this text wrote, ***when we enter into membership in Christian community, we bind ourselves to one another with Christ as our head.*** *We strive to seek the common good in the midst of our differences. Collectively we seek God’s wisdom and God’s will before our own by taking risks in forming relationships beyond our comfort zones, our gender, our nationality, our language, our ethnicity or our 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, conformity, and uniformity*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 In the Gospel lesson that we just read from Matthew, Jesus addressed the very issue of how we, as a Christian community, ought to deal with one another, especially when we are in disagreement or have committed sins against one another. Fellowship in Christ requires constant and boundless forbearance, forgiving of one another “70x7” times. It calls upon the same unconditional love as Christ demonstrated for us. This act of forgiveness is certainly easier said than done. It is never easy. But Christ has called upon us to do what is hard...not what’s easy. It is necessary for us to take a step back and attempt to listen. Listen to what the others might have to say, as we seek common ground and reconcile with one another.

 In our passage today, Christ outlined a series of steps for believers to undertake in hope of healing and restoring a broken body. As Jesus demonstrated to us that we ought to extend grace, humility, and compassion, by listening and committing to prayers for one another, even to those who have hurt our feelings, betrayed our loyalty, gossiped around or stabbed behind our backs.

 The Apostle Paul also reminded us that we ought to “*lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”[[4]](#footnote-4)* **in order to focus on the welfare of others before ourselves. We are all imperfect people who deserve condemnation and judgment and we’ve come to seek God’s grace and be reconciled with Christ and with one another.**

 **As one of my mentors and friend - Dr. Rev. Jin S. Kim 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.”****[[5]](#footnote-5)*

 Through Christ, **we come to experience God’s wholesome presence whenever two or three are gathered in God’s name, and wherever we experience human brokenness and in the absence of grace and mercy.** God has raised our awareness and called upon us to respond accordingly and responsibly through our action and our words. This is where reconciliation and healing must take place. Undeservingly, we come, in spite of our own shortcomings and sinfulness against one another and against God. This is where we can honestly come before God and say that “We are sorry!” as we seek God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

 As another theologian wrote, *“if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? If the church – no matter how small, even just two or three believers – will agree in Christ and seek prayerfully to do the will of God, then God will respond. The church, then, will really be the church, because Jesus will be present.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

 Friends, Christ has called upon us (the church) to follow his examples as healers, ambassadors, and reconcilers of this world. **Let us give LOVE a chance, as we exercise God’s grace by dismantling hatred, bitterness, and divisions among us.**  **Whenever and wherever two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, Christ is there among us!** Let us seek God’s presence by extending God’s compassion and grace in our words and in our actions! Let us plant God’s seed of love in the lives of others.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen!

1. *Matthew 7:3* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ephesians 4:2-3* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kim, Jin S *Feasting on the Word* Year A, Vol 3, p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Romans 13:12* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Kim, Jin S. Year A Volume 3, p. 48* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hambrick-Stowe, Charles *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4, p.48* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)