

John's Love Letters: Apology and Forgiveness
John 20:19-31; I John 1:5-2:11
April 30, 2006

The challenge for the early Christians following Jesus' resurrection was figuring out how to live what Jesus taught. Relinquishing behaviors of the past and replacing them with Jesus' way of love was not always easy. Old patterns are deeply engrained and we often slip back into them unawares.

The three letters of John are written to a community that is experiencing some conflict. We gather that someone has claimed to be sinless but has disobeyed the commandments. Some have professed to love God but hate their neighbors. There are broken relationships in the community, not unlike those we experience in our families, friendships, communities, and world. The letters, which are more like sermons in style, offer some tips for restoring broken relationships.

A major theme of today's passage is confession and forgiveness of sin. Those who "walk in darkness" and do not "live according to the truth" live lives that are inconsistent. They live a lie. But "if we confess our sins, [Jesus Christ] is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

A boss asked one of his employees, "Do you believe in life after death?"

"Yes, I do," the man replied.

"Well then you won't be surprised to learn that after you left early yesterday to go to your grandmother's funeral, she stopped in to see if you wanted to go out for lunch!"

Confession of our sins is where many of us get stuck. We can't even get "off the starting block." Recently I had occasion to return to Dale Carnegie's classic, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. He begins the book with stories of several criminals, including "Two Gun" Crowley, Al Capone, and Dutch Shultz, none of whom blamed themselves for their crimes. They could not accept responsibility for their actions. Al Capone, America's most notorious Public Enemy, the most sinister gang leader who shot up Chicago, regarded himself as an unappreciated and misunderstood public benefactor. He had not sinned; others were to blame for his crimes. Carnegie's point is that people don't criticize themselves, no matter how wrong they really are.¹ We find it difficult to confess our sins; it is far easier to notice the faults of others than it is to see our own.

Our reluctance to admit our faults and wrongdoings keeps us lurking in the shadows, hiding in the darkness where we cannot fully be ourselves. The darkness within us, the lies we live, prevent us from reaching our full potential. Those involved in twelve step recovery programs have some principles that help them move from the darkness to the light. These are some of their steps:

We honestly admit our weaknesses, that we are powerless over our darker habits and that our lives have become unmanageable.

We trust God to restore us to sanity.

We turn our will and our lives over to God.

We make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

We admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

We are entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character....

We humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings.

The foundation of twelve step programs is truth, honesty, and confession. These enable one to move out of the dark shadows and walk in the light.

The scriptures give us the assurance that on the other side of confession lays forgiveness from God. God is faithful and just and will forgive us when we acknowledge our shortcomings. We need not be afraid to be honest, but we do need to wake up, to own up to our responsibility, to recognize our weaknesses.

The internet is apparently providing a safe “confession booth” for many people. There are websites on which you can post your confession. But these cyber-confessions lack a response from God or another human being. There is a certain amount of healing and relief that can come from simply being honest and telling the truth, but our souls are enriched when we allow forgiveness to flow into the void left by our confession. Forgiveness draws us back into relationship with God and with others. Merely posting our confession on the World Wide Web misses the personal touch of forgiveness and relationship.

One of our Lenten small groups spoke of the need for a safe community, a small group of fellow disciples who are struggling to live Jesus’ way. Such a trusting environment can be a place of confession, where we are honest about where we have strayed from Jesus’ way and how we desire to be different. It is healing to come out of the shadows, be human and honest, and receive the forgiveness of God through community.

Perhaps you remember the romantic book and movie of the seventies, *Love Story*. The slogan taken from the book for its advertisements was, “Love means never having to say you are sorry.” I think they got it wrong. Love means saying we’re sorry again and again and again. We grow when we are self-aware enough to recognize our failings and confess them. Relationships are threatened when wounds and hurts build up over time without the benefit of healing apologies. Relationships grow when apology and forgiveness are exchanged.

This goes for corporate bodies as well as individual relationships. Oftentimes institutions, including nations, corporations, even the church, do harmful deeds to human beings. It is healing for institutions to recognize their faults, to confess, and to take steps to make amends for harmful behaviors. For wounds that are left to fester without healing leak a poison that is destructive to individuals over time.

In his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller tells about a time when he went to a festival on their college campus. The campus was renowned for drunkenness, nakedness, and drug consumption among the students who attended it. They went there to set up a confession booth.

This booth had a twist. It was not a place to come and confess one’s sins; rather it was a place to come and hear the confessions of the Christians who ran it. They recognized and apologized for all of the church’s atrocities which contradicted the message of Jesus Christ. The Crusades. The Televangelists. Politicized religiosity. Neglect of the poor and marginalized in our society.

Pagan festival-goers came, fully aware of these blights upon the church. But at this confession booth, the church asked *them* for forgiveness. Their response was respect. Curiosity. Tears. Appreciation. Healing.

It was not only a great missional opportunity, but it is a great picture of the heart of confession in I John 1. The campus confession was admitting what a disenchanted audience of nonbelievers already knew about the church: It was sinful and imperfect. Christian confession is similar. It owns up to the reality of the ways in which we have not perfectly followed Christ. God is already aware of these things, so confession is not an information transfer; it’s a relational healing.²

Confession restores right relationship with God. When we say something hurtful to a spouse or friend, things are a little stilted between us until we go and seek forgiveness. Relationship is awkward when there is an offense between people. Relationship between God and his followers is no different when wrongs between them remain unrecognized and unreconciled.

But confession also restores our relationship with other Christians. Confession brings us out of the darkness into the light where we can fellowship with one another. It all begins, however, with the difficult task of admitting that we are wrong. Fans of the old sitcom *Happy Days* may remember the two words that the Fonz could never make pass his lips: "I'm sorry." He would stutter and stammer, but never get beyond "I'm s-s-s-s-s-so-so-so...."

In recent years leaders of nations and of the church have been willing to issue acts of repentance about past acts of sinfulness, such as slavery and racism, the treatment of Native Americans in the settlement of the United States, silence and inactivity in the face of the Holocaust, and the internment of Japanese Americans. Unfortunately it has taken a great length of time between the occurrence of these events and the acts of repentance. Even now many people continue to suffer the unjust consequences of the original wrongdoings.

Perhaps we can learn not to wait so long, but to become more conscious of our actions before and as they are happening, to stop and examine our moral compass and where our actions fall within the realm of morality. Today we are wrestling with so many complex issues for which there are no single precipitous cause and no clear answers. They are systemic problems which will require shifts in perspective and cooperation among all parties in order to resolve. The first step toward resolution is to stop and examine our own complicity in the systems that perpetuate injustice. We need to recognize what has gone wrong and how we have contributed. With genuine humility, apologies and confession can contribute toward softening the walls that divide us and opening opportunities for dialogue and constructive action. If we forever remain entrenched in an attitude of "my way is the only way," we will miss many opportunities the world needs for renewal and restoration of life. Apology is a step of maturity.

An author tells of an encounter witnessed at a bus stop between two strangers. The observer was sitting next to a woman reading a newspaper, but totally engrossed in the performance of a 14-year-old boy on a skateboard. The teen had his baseball cap turned around with the bill in the back, and he was skating beautifully and very fast. He buzzed by the bus stop once, then twice. When he came by a third time, he accidentally knocked the woman's newspaper out of her hands. She said, "Oh, why don't you grow up!"

The skateboarder glided down to the corner of the block, where he stood talking with his buddy. The two of them kept looking back over their

shoulders at the woman. She hesitated for a moment, then rolled up her paper, tucked it under her arm and walked into the street, motioning to him. "Won't you come here?" she called. "I want to talk to you."

Very reluctantly, he skated over to her, turned his cap around with the bill in front, and said, "Yeah?"

She said, "What I meant to say was that I was afraid that I might get hurt. I apologize for what I did say."

His face lit up, and he said, "How cool!"

That moment was a small miracle, a holy, healing moment between generations, between two human beings who had just become important strangers to each other. The woman chose to shift the shape of her experience by moving out of reactivity into creativity.³

What a sign of maturity to say, "I'm sorry. I misspoke. When I lashed out at you, I was really afraid for myself." How we might change the world if we acknowledge and own our feelings, recognize their consequential actions, apologize for our wrongdoings, and seek forgiveness from God, ourselves, and one another.

As we seek to grow in community with one another and with our human brothers and sisters around the world, let us recognize the great value of apology and forgiveness. Genuine love does mean saying, "I'm sorry."

Prayers of the People

Eternal Light, we praise you for your radiance and splendor. You beam your rays of brilliance into the dark corners of our lives, calling us out of despair into hope. You shed your light upon the pathways you would have us walk, granting us guidance for our daily living. You shine your light around and within us, warming our hearts with assurance of your abiding presence.

Forgive us, O God, for those times in which we hover in the shadows, seeking to hide from your light. We confess that we allow the darkness of hatred or indifference to overcome us and separate us from our brothers and sisters. Forgive us, O God. Cleanse us of unholy thoughts and habits. Fill us anew with your light, that we might walk faithfully in your ways. Grant us boldness to speak and live your truth.

Help us to grow in our ability to forgive others, to let go of resentments and hurt that weigh us down and hinder us from meaningful relationships. Help us to see our differences as part of the beauty of your world. May we discover new learnings from those who differ from us.

We pray, O God of Light, that you would shed your wisdom upon leaders of our world and our nation who try to find the pathway through challenging issues, including immigration, war, energy, and human rights. May we you people be open to your guidance, that we might be empowered to advocate changes that lead to justice for all.

May your light shine upon those who dwell in the darkness of grief. Blanket all who grieve with your loving warmth and presence.

May those who are ill be showered with your beams of radiance, lifting their spirits.....

¹ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936), pp. 3-5.

² *Homiletics*, April 23, 2006, p. 63.

³ Angeles Arrien, "Walking the Mystical Path With Practical Feet," *Nourishing the Soul*, eds. Anne Simpkinson, Charles Simpkinson and Rose Solari (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), p. 104. Retrieved from Homiletics Online, April 29, 2006.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA