

April 8, 2018 – 1 John 1:1-2:2 & John 20:19-31

“Love means never having to say you're sorry.” Have you ever heard that line before? It's actually a quote from the 1970 book and movie *Love Story* by Erich Segal. The book was a New York Times bestseller. The movie was a blockbuster and one of the most successful movies ever made.

It came out long before my time, but I still know the quote. It's one of those clichés that, for whatever reason, has resonated through the decades.

Probably because we'd all like to have a relationship that didn't require apologies. A friendship or family or marriage where we knew each other so well, there was no need to say, “I'm sorry.” Where we treated each other so well that it was unnecessary. Where we loved each other so much that every fault was immediately overlooked. That's what the line is trying to get at.

But is it really true? We have a lot of people in this room who love each other deeply. Who have been married for many, many years. And who have said, “I'm sorry,” many, many times. Far too many to count.

Anyone with an ounce of wisdom or common sense – anyone who has ever been in a healthy relationship of any kind – knows that love means saying you're sorry. Over and over and over again.

Which, I'll be honest, is not something that I'm very good at doing. I've never been good at admitting when I was wrong. Even when I was a kid, I would make a mess or get caught breaking the rules. And my first reaction was to try and argue my way out of it. My mom always thought I would end up being a lawyer because, as she would say, I could argue black into white.

Marriage has taught me many things in this regard. But it took some time. Ask my wife how long it took me to stop saying, “I'm sorry, but...” or, “I'm sorry if...” There was always a qualifier. Always a loophole to excuse my actions or put the blame somewhere else.

Human beings are horrible at apologizing. We always have been. Adam refused to apologize: “The woman you gave me, she made me do it.” Eve refused to apologize: “The serpent you created, he made me do it.” Cain refused to apologize: “Am I my brother's keeper?” And on and on it went throughout history.

We hate saying we're sorry. We hate saying it to each other. And we hate saying it to God. Which is why so much of the Bible is filled with God's prophets calling people to repentance.

Book after book of the Bible. We have a loving God. But, honestly, if you just open up to a random spot in Scripture, there's a good chance you're not going to read something that sounds very loving. And that's because we have to be hit over the head with our sin over and over again before we'll see it.

Jesus himself does the same thing. Yes, Jesus has some very loving words of grace and forgiveness to give us. But, far more often, like John the Baptist who prepared the way for him, Jesus has some pretty harsh things to say as well.

You brood of vipers. You den of robbers. You whitewashed tombs. You hypocrites. You children of the devil. The man had some pretty choice insults to throw out there.

But he didn't do it simply out of anger and judgement. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” This isn't about condemnation. This is about confession. This is about saying you're sorry.

Because if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we refuse to confess. If we refuse to repent. If we refuse to honestly say we're sorry. Then we're just lying to ourselves. We're just arguing black into white.

And what's worse, if we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and his word is not in us. Because God's Word very much calls us sinners. Over and over again.

Throughout the prophets. Throughout the Gospels. Throughout the Epistles. Throughout the whole Bible. There are two consistent messages. One is that you and I are sinners. We have broken God's laws. We have hurt our neighbors. We have rebelled against the almighty.

We are a brood of vipers. A den of robbers. Whitewashed tombs. Complete hypocrites. And worst of all, children of the devil. That is how we are born. And, by our own power, that is how we will stay.

But the other message of the Bible is that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Which is really a weird statement, when you think about it. We say it often. Every time we follow divine service setting one. But have you ever thought about?

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins. Just to forgive. There is no justice in forgiveness. Forgiving someone is the opposite of justice. It's withholding the justice – the condemnation, the judgment, the penalty – that they deserve.

And yet, we don't deserve it anymore. Because, as John tells us a few verses later, Jesus Christ the righteous is our advocate with the Father. He is the propitiation for our sins. A propitiation is an offering for guilt. It's an appeal to God to accept a sacrifice in place of punishment.

Jesus is that sacrifice given in our place. He is the one who dies and rises again. So that we might simply and confidently confess our sins and know that God is faithful to forgive us – no matter what they are – and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Just like our relationships with our friends and family members and spouses, that is our relationship with God. Love means always saying your sorry. To love God is to constantly come before him saying, "I have sinned and fallen short of Your glory."

That is the truth that is in us. And that truth is ugly and painful, because it shows me the sinner that I really am. It is ugly and painful, because it shows me how often I have disobeyed God and hurt my neighbor. It is ugly and unpleasant, because it shows me the death that Jesus died for me.

But it is also beautiful and glorious, because it shows me the forgiveness of sins and the resurrected life that I have through him. It is beautiful and glorious, because it shows me the fellowship I have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. It is beautiful and glorious, because it shows me the fellowship I have with each of you through Christ.

We are forgiven people because we know the truth of our sinfulness. And so we are forgiving people because we know the truth that God has forgiven them too.

If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven. If you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld. Because what happens down here, is an echo of what happens up there. Our fellowship with each other is a reflection of our fellowship with God.

And when we stand together in worship, and I say, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," it isn't me saying that. It is Christ himself saying it.

It is Christ himself saying, "You are forgiven. Now forgive each other." You aren't just a bunch of people united by your membership at Immanuel Lutheran Church. You are a fellowship of believers united by the forgiveness found in word and water and bread and wine. You are a fellowship of believers united by Christ's own crucified and resurrected body.

While the world walks in darkness, you walk in the light of Christ. While the world stubbornly clings to its sins, you know that love means saying you're sorry. Saying you're sorry to God. Saying you're sorry to each other. And knowing that the God who declared peace to his disciples has peace with you. Amen.