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07/2017 | Monthly Topic

Offering a true apology

by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. — 1 John 1:8-9

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. — Matthew 5:23-24

Years ago, when I was a new pastor, I met with a volunteer Sunday School director—let's call her Gail. I was anxious to discuss some concerns, anxious to fix the program, anxious to show good leadership—anxious in general. And anxiety did not lead me well. Apparently I came across as critical, dismissive and cold. After the meeting, Gail sent an email expressing her anger and hurt. I asked for a follow-up meeting and she agreed, giving me the opportunity to offer an honest, heartfelt apology to help repair our relationship—an opportunity I unfortunately botched.

When Gail explained to me how my words and tone had made her feel, I answered, "I'm sorry you felt hurt. I didn't intend that at all. In fact, here's what I was trying to say . . ." and then I spent half an hour restating my case.

It's no surprise that this "apology" didn't help. Gail resigned her position; our relationship remained tense for years. Whenever I saw Gail, I felt guilty that things hadn't gone better.

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Should I say something? I wondered. No, a voice said. If you apologize, you'll be admitting you were wrong, and then people will think you have no idea what you're doing. Besides, if you say something now, you'll just dredge up the past and make things worse. Maybe if you act like it never happened, things will improve on their own.

That's a lot of wrong for one internal dialogue!

I should have known better. After all, I recited the confession and forgiveness in worship every week: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Confession—which is a form of apology—is a healthy part of faith. In seminary, I learned that apology is part of the reason for the passing of the peace, which is modeled after Jesus' instructions in the gospel of Matthew to "first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." This is why it is often placed before the offering in the liturgy: to allow members of the community to acknowledge and resolve conflicts before sharing the offering and the meal together.

I can handle confession and forgiveness. The general acknowledgment that I have sinned (along with everybody else) is mercifully light on details. And spending time in "reflection and self-examination," that is, privately pondering my sins, is already something I do daily—or nightly, when the day's stumbles convince me that I am a failure. In those cases, only God is listening.

But a true face-to-face apology to someone I have hurt? That's tricky. If I say I'm sorry, admit I messed up, become vulnerable in my failings—what then? So sometimes I can't bring myself to apologize, even when I know I should. Other times I over-apologize, even for things that aren't my fault, saying a

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generalized, shallow “I’m sorry” so often that it becomes meaningless. And time and again, I discover that acting like something never happened never seems to make it disappear.

Saying “I’m sorry, but . . .” is not a true apology. In seeking to justify or explain away something I have done or left undone, I dismiss the other person’s right to their feelings and experience. Likewise, “I’m sorry that you . . .” is not a true apology. It makes the other person’s feelings their problem, their fault, rather than making it clear that I realize that their feelings are the result of my actions.

When I have hurt other people, I learn (and re-learn) that what I intended is beside the point, and explaining why someone shouldn’t feel hurt is never helpful.

There’s a reason that the church practices confession and forgiveness, and the passing of the peace, the same reason that Jesus always connected love of God with love of neighbor. The abundant life Jesus offers is life in relationship and community. Being human means that our relationships and communities inevitably fall short. We hurt others; others hurt us. We need to give apologies, and we need to hear them.

The grace of God reminds us that our worth does not depend on always getting it right. So there is nothing to be lost (and much to be gained) by admitting our human failures — even the well-intentioned ones. As the verse from 1 Peter suggests, the apologies we never give can prevent us from fully offering our gifts to the community. Trying to convince ourselves that we can’t risk an apology because we’re right, or because we “didn’t mean to,” or for any other reason, means that — in the words of 1 John — we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

But as Jesus says, the truth can set us free. It is never too late to offer a true apology. So today, I took a deep breath and sent one to Gail. I hope she reads it.

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Discussion questions:

1. What's the most meaningful apology you have ever received, and what's the hardest apology you have ever given?
2. What makes it difficult to offer a true apology? How might faith in God help?
3. What would it look like for the church, as a whole, to offer a true apology? Where might it be needed?

Closing prayer:

God of endless grace and mercy, you know how our stubbornness and fear keep us from apologizing, and you yearn for us to experience the gift of freedom and healing that can come from true apologies. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, give us courage to be vulnerable, to speak truth, to give and receive forgiveness; that in apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation with one another, we might experience your abundant life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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07/03/2017 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic

Faith reflections: Healing after brokenness

by AmyJo Mattheis

Sin is the source of our wounds, and forgiveness is the balm that heals. As a Christian raised in the Lutheran tradition, I believe that our baptism is at the center of how we interact with the violence and brokenness of sin.

Baptism changes the way we see the world because baptism gives us all the forgiveness we will ever need, the very moment we are touched by the water. That's a profound statement for Lutherans who are baptized as infants. God pours out unending grace and forgiveness before we have chosen wrong, and without our knowing what we will choose to do over the course of our lives. We are cleansed with the waters of forgiveness that promise we need not purify ourselves again. "We are born children of a fallen humanity; in baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life." Baptism does not mean we live outside the reality of sin. Baptism means we live as already forgiven sinners.

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, " This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

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I completed four months of my seminary internship in the holy city of Jerusalem. My husband and I left eight months early due to an experience of severe pain and brokenness we encountered there. Anger raged inside me for what seemed like endless weeks and months. I knew intellectually I needed to forgive those who had wronged me, but my heart was overshadowed with hate.

As a baptized child of God, I had all the forgiveness I would need for my own wrongdoings. I was now confronted with living as a person of forgiveness in the middle of the gritty reality of sin. How does a baptized disciple of Christ live forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a leading characteristic of a follower of Christ. We are given this gift in our baptism, and we are called to work at exercising it throughout our journey as a Christian. Engaging the hurt was the work I needed to do to learn that the One who gave me my freedom from sin was also the One who would give forgiveness to those who had hurt me. God could, would, and did forgive the actions that led to my pain. Where I could not forgive, I came to the epiphany that God already had. I let go of the guilt I carried for not wanting to forgive them myself, and was released to live fully in my own baptismal promise of worth, validity, and love. It was a gift that gave me time to heal and to rediscover God's action within me.

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:26-28)

My heart is touched each time I sing the "Now the Feast" liturgy. The third stanza in the Hymn of Praise is most compelling: "For God has come to dwell with us, to make us people of God. To make all things new!"

Worship leads to the table of life, where we receive the body and blood of Christ that gives us the power to forgive and keep going. God will make all things new! From the cross of death we are given the food of life!

During my time of healing I participated in worship and received communion regularly. I was being filled with the bread and wine of forgiveness. We come to the table of Jesus as we are, in all of our humanity and sin. We are not asked to dress up our souls, to look good before we eat. Rather, we

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come as sinners to the table of Christ, believing Jesus sees all of who we are, and still wants to give us his life.

“The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus Answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:30-32)

Followers of Christ washed with forgiveness and fed with forgiveness, even as we are sinners, cannot and will not refuse it to another. No one was denied Christ's table. He had a reputation for eating with sinners and prostitutes. We take our cues about who is welcome at Christ's table of forgiveness from the One who is the host. Jesus consistently moved his table beyond the boundaries and lines of purity, righteousness, and acceptability. We who eat at that same table, who kneel to receive strength for our own personal forgiveness, are called to rise and look honestly at the sin of our corporate life, of the system of “how things are.” We are connected to the larger world at the table of Christ.

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:17)

The forgiveness we receive compels us beyond our own hurts and fears into significant realities of the world's pain, injustice, and sin. Christ's gift of freedom means that our sin does not define us. Sin does not have the last word!

Forgiven followers of Jesus go where Jesus went. Regularly practicing our sacraments of baptism and eating at the table of life gives us the power to forgive. When we find that source, we move beyond the walls the world erects and break them down through our acts of genuine, hard, gritty forgiveness. We become freed people who free the world!

The Rev. AmyJo Mattheis is currently an ELCA pastor serving in Stockton, California. Her first call was in the New York Metropolitan Synod, where she served with her husband, the Rev. Peter Holmquist. They work together both as pastors and parents; their three children are Elias, Zoe, and Quinn.

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