

Chapel Talk  
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“I’m Sorry”

Over Long Weekend, my sister and her family stopped by on their way to Washington. The adults played tennis, Carter and his cousins shot baskets, and then we had a raucous dinner together. As Carter expertly cooked the meat for the tacos, he casually asked me if after dinner he could go over to Jake’s house. Without thinking too much about his request, I said yes, figuring he had been with family for a while, that seeing Jake would be fun, and I assumed it was only a five-minute drive to Jake’s home. So at the end of this joyous and laughter-filled meal, just before dessert, I quietly excused myself to take Carter to Jake’s, thinking I’d be back in 15 minutes, in plenty of time for brownies and ice cream; my departure would be barely noticed. As I got up to leave, I glanced across the table, smiling lovingly and happily at Heidi; her look and smile back at me, I remembered at the time, seemed different, not immediately readable; nevertheless, I carried my plate to the kitchen, grabbed the keys and joined Carter in the car.

Actually, Jake’s house is over 20 minutes away, so I returned 45 minutes later to find the table cleared, the sink empty, pots dried, and everyone milling around waiting for dessert to begin. Heidi seemed busy, but again, there was a lot going on – getting the brownies cut, the ice cream scooped, the chocolate sauce warmed – therefore I didn’t perceive anything more than the normal activity associated with a large dinner party.

Yet as soon as we closed our bedroom door and got into bed, Heidi pointedly questioned why I let Carter go to Jake’s in the middle of this family gathering, deserting everyone for almost an hour, taking Carter away from his cousins who had driven half a day to be here for the first time in three years; and did I realize how rude I was to my sister and her family? Laying on my back in bed, staring into the hollow, white color of the ceiling, I suddenly felt very alone. My stomach tightened into a hole, a knot of strained, anxious emotions. Recalling Heidi’s look at me across the supper table hours earlier, it dawned on me what I missed – that she was asking why was I letting Carter leave, why weren’t

we talking about this situation. I sensed the walls of my imagined abyss getting taller; the pit in my stomach, a paradoxically gaping void churning with guilt and anger, stupidity and regret, exile and confusion, erupted through my soul. I became silent in the face of my all-too-clear mistake.

The next thing I heard Heidi ask was, “What were you thinking, Will?” – and as those cliffs rose higher around me, as I plummeted deeper into oblivion, I blurted out desperately, urgently: “I’m sorry – I screwed up – I was totally wrong – I’m sorry.” That confession didn’t solve the problem – notice my answer to “What were you thinking?” was “I’m sorry,” not “I was stupidly thinking that since Carter had cooked supper and it was Long Weekend and Jake’s was only five minutes away, that it was fine for Carter to go.” But my admission, strangely, made me feel less isolated. I knew that I was wrong, yet while the humiliation of seeing my fault separated me, I also sensed some initial connection by professing, “I’m sorry. This is all my doing.” It was as if my words started to build a bridge for me – a board across the chasm. The more Heidi and I talked together – the more I tried to explain my flawed thinking – the more boards appeared, the sturdier the structure became, the firmer the connection was that linked the two of us.

No one likes to be wrong, to be called out on a mistake, to redress a fault. Despite our humanity – which means that we are fallen, mortal creatures; that we cannot perform perfectly; that we stumble and fail and bruise – we still hate to acknowledge our inevitable and unavoidable shortcomings. What gets in the way? Pride and ego, denial and exhaustion, fear and guilt: they complicate our ability to accept what we do so frustratingly easy, which is hurt others and ourselves through intentional or unintentional actions. We are also scared to appear weak or fallible, for legal or moral reasons. We’re nervous that we’ll bear all the responsibility, since our friends and colleagues will abandon us once we confess our culpability. Additionally, we’re humbled by how much we should be apologizing for on a daily basis. It’s difficult to find people who are honestly accountable for their behavior and words.

History, literature, and the current world teem with examples of how difficult it is to apologize. Countries argue whether they should apologize and offer reparations for past

failings like slavery, the Holocaust, genocides, internments. Some people believe that a country will free itself of its collective moral guilt by conceding its wrongdoings to the world; the counter-argument is that since no one now living committed these atrocities, there is no one alive at fault. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett grapples with how to apologize for her pride; a wife in *Enduring Love* sadly discerns the person she must apologize to is dead; *Anna Karenina*, *Macbeth* and *Beloved* are replete with characters who encounter physical manifestations of their sins, embodiments these individuals tragically labor to confront. The Catholic Church is struggling to comprehend its crimes involving priests who abused young children; bank presidents are wrestling with how to hold onto their jobs and credibility while explaining the flawed practices that contributed to the economic crisis. Politicians have perfected the art of pointing out others' egregious faults while claiming they themselves were "misinformed," "misspoke," or in the most reprehensible phrase, that "mistakes were made." Public figures apologize to "anyone who was offended" – putting the focus on those who were upset, as if they over reacted, rather than on themselves for what they did. Parents instruct their young children, "Say you're sorry," and most children repeat back in a monotone voice, "sorry," leaving out the "I am" because even children hesitate to shoulder ownership of their deeds. Many adults hold onto that manner of speaking, shortening their apologies to "sorry," a direct object lacking a subject and verb, a phrase without responsibility or effort, a fragmented atonement.

Saying "I'm sorry" is arduous and awkward – in fact, one of its root meanings from the old English is "sore," as in pain and distress. Declaring "I'm sorry" means realizing, "I'm in pain." Perhaps the word "sorry" began when we understood our condition, and confessed the inner angst and hurt we felt by our conduct. But maybe within that acknowledgement lies the hope, the salvation and the reunion: saying, "I'm sorry" to the person we've injured initially allows us to envision our emotional state, and then express it. We make the despair real by giving it voice, and we unite with another by speaking it, by being heard. Ultimately, proclaiming "I'm sorry" is both an accounting and a liberating endeavor; it is an act of courage.

A few years ago, my father realized he was an alcoholic, and he has embraced The Twelve Step Program ever since. Because of the brutal effect alcohol can have on people and relationships, three of those twelve steps involve admitting “The exact nature of our wrongs,” compiling “a list of all persons we had harmed,” and then making “direct amends to such people wherever possible.” I can only imagine how exhausting and terrifying it must be to re-experience such excruciating moments, to take an honest moral inventory. It must require tremendous resolve, even bravery, to face people we’ve injured or abused. But it must also be such a cleansing, an un-shackling of guilt and remorse, a re-birthing through repentance, a positive step forward. These recovering alcoholics discovered a brutal, vital truth that the rest of us fight – that only by taking complete ownership of our deeds and words, can we truly say, “I’m sorry” and be restored to those around us. Recently, my dad started a conversation with me about an incident years ago, maybe when I was in high school; he wanted to apologize to me for how he behaved because he’d been drinking that evening. I told him I had no recollection of this moment, but I quickly sensed that my memory of this incident was insignificant compared to my dad’s desire, even years later, to apologize for it. I forgave him with a hug.

Last February, Vusi Mahlasela told us that there is “wisdom in forgiveness” – and I believe he meant not only in forgiving others, but also in forgiving ourselves. When we announce, “I’m sorry,” we forgive ourselves: we stop denying our infallibility, and we recognize our need of others. As I reflected about the recent, sad stories of people who balked at acknowledging their mistakes, I saw how isolated they were, how much pain they were in, how they refused to accept their humanity. They must be so scared of losing all that really doesn’t matter in their lives. Because the people who admit their errors and own them; the people who embrace and even celebrate their imperfections; the individuals who forgive themselves and who seek forgiveness from others: they are the ones surrounded by loving, affirming, redeeming friends. Yes, there is deep, excruciating pain in our souls when we hurt others, when we fail ourselves; and we so desperately want to do better, to be better people and friends and partners and parents and children and citizens and communities and countries. But the only way to ease that misery and distress is to bond with our fellow sufferers. In that welcoming communion resides wisdom and solace, hope and amends, restoration and acceptance, grace and generosity.