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First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 3:1-12  
3<sup>rd</sup> in a series on “Who Is My Neighbor?”

### “I’m Sorry”

*O God, we thank You for this day. We thank You for another opportunity to be faithful to You, and to take what you have blessed our lives with and to reach out in love to others. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

This is my 3<sup>rd</sup> sermon in our series “Who Is My Neighbor?” Just a quick recap: it was last winter when I started thinking about what I wanted the church’s voice and presence to be in the middle of what I assumed, and has turned out to be, a heated presidential election. I knew I didn’t want our voice to be heated, or divisive, or seen as partisan. At the same time, I recognize that while some of you hold strong political opinions; there are differing opinions here but as Christians we are called to model the basic values that Jesus taught, and hatred and divisiveness are not among them. We’re called to be better than that. We’re called to recognize that everyone is our neighbor, even the people we don’t particularly like or who don’t vote like us or act like us or look like us or believe like us or who *simply did us wrong*. Try as we might to find a loophole, everyone is our neighbor and therefore worthy of God’s compassion, care and love, and we are called to reflect that care, compassion, and love. And yep, that is hard. No one said being a Christian is easy. And Lord knows we don’t always get it right. This is why we come together every week and confess our sins, because we say and do things we shouldn’t have said and done, and we leave undone and unsaid those things we should have said and should have done. Thank God for God’s grace and mercy that forgives sinners like us.

And that’s what I want to talk to you about this morning. The fact that we are all sinners who are called to say, “I’m sorry” and repent. Aren’t you glad you came this morning?!?

This was actually not in my original plan. But life happens, and the Spirit speaks. And this week, the Spirit was prompting me to talk about the importance of acknowledging our sins, which is to say owning up to the fact that we don't always get it right, and the importance of then saying "I'm sorry" or "we're sorry" when we get it wrong, even if what we said or did was unintentional. These two simple words – I'm sorry -- can heal wounds, restore relationships, and bridge divides in ways few others can. In a world that often encourages pride over humility, admitting when we're wrong and seeking forgiveness is a powerful act of love. It's a way of seeing our neighbors—truly seeing them—and taking a step toward healing and reconciliation. And we need more of that.

But ironically, when I googled – literally – "saying I'm sorry", the top hits were all about how to stop apologizing. Yet in hindsight, this is not surprising. It's rare to hear leaders apologize and that has trickled down into folks of everyday life; in fact, more often than not these days, people dig in their heels and come up with a whole host of reasons for why they shouldn't apologize. Maybe this is because saying I'm sorry means acknowledging our shortcomings, something that many of us are loath to do because it bruises our egos. But when a mistake is inevitably made – and friends we all make mistakes -- understanding how to own up to it allows us to properly process what has happened, let it go, and move on to a better version of ourselves so we can be a neighbor.

Which leads me to John the Baptist. "Repent! For the kingdom of God has come near." In our Matthew reading, John was specifically calling on the religious and political elite to repent, and the Greek word used here (metanoia) literally means taking on a new mindset, turning about, and changing course. But in order for the people to do that, they also needed to turn their backs on everything in which they had been participating and from which they had been benefitting.

In church terms, to repent is to turn away from sin and to turn towards a new way of life. But let's be honest, we don't like to think we've sinned. If there is anything that prompts more comments in a worship service other than the sermon and hymns, it's the prayer of confession. Sometimes people will say

to me, “I didn’t like that prayer of confession” or “Annie, I didn’t do any of that stuff”. And maybe you didn’t. But our prayers of confession are corporate; rarely do they contain the first-person singular pronoun “I”. We confess together, because while we may personally not be, for example, racist or homophobic or selfish or unfair— just to name a few of the things people take issue with in our prayers of confession -- we do participate in systems that are unfair, or racist or homophobic, or that encourage us to be selfish. This is why for us a Prayer of Confession is something in which the whole body engages; but like it or not, sin begins in the individual human heart and results in a world that is far less than the world God intends. Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of Christian faith because all you have to do to see that something is wrong is pick up the daily newspaper.

It would be naïve and irrelevant to ignore the fact that everything is not the way it is supposed to be. You don’t have to believe that we are totally depraved – which the Calvinists taught, to acknowledge that we are not what we could be.

So what is our problem and what can we do about it? What separates us from God and our own best selves? What is the root sin, the original deadliest sin? Augustine thought it was lust. The Reformers thought it was pride. I think it just might be sloth, which is to say the absence or lack of care. Our problem is not that we think too highly of ourselves, it’s that we don’t think highly enough, so we settle for far less than we can be, both as individuals and as a society. Karl Menninger said our sin is looking at the world and everything that is wrong, throwing up our hands and saying, “What, after all, can I do about it?” Theologian Fred Craddock put it more bluntly: sloth is “the ability to look at a starving child with a swollen belly and say, ‘Well, it’s not my kid’” (Norris, p. 115).

So if this is our problem, what should we do about it? For one thing, we should own up to it, name it. But then we must repent. Which is more than just saying we’re sorry. Repentance is a two-fold action; the first is to acknowledge the sin and the second is to commit ourselves to a new way of life. It’s not enough just to say we’re sorry; we have to be committed to changing our ways, too.

Kathleen Norris once wrote about a little boy who had a pretty good understanding of what it meant to repent in a poem called “The Monster Who Was Sorry.”

In the poem, he began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response to that is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: “I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’”

Norris writes: *“My messy house” says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage but also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, she writes, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, and not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?*

This, my friends, is repentance. Like the little boy in the poem, repentance is looking around and saying to yourself, “I really shouldn’t have done that,” and then making amends for it. And when we do this, we’re better neighbors.

Years ago, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church wrote a short essay about this. He wrote,

“... The world needs the church to display what genuine confession (and) repentance . . . look like.

. . . imagine the effects of how that very original sin – Adam and Eve -- might have been averted – by confession. They could have averted punishment if they had accepted blame and asked for mercy. A real apology, without blame shifting, could have changed the course of history. It still can.”

Friends, after John calls out “repent”, he follows that up with “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.” His message is clear: repentance

prepares the way for God to work in us and through us. When we recognize our wrongs, when we say “I’m sorry” with sincerity, we straighten the paths that are askew so that we can bring about healing within ourselves and with our neighbors.

Let us not shy away from repentance. Instead, let us embrace it as a gift, a path that leads to reconciliation, peace, and renewed relationships. As we journey together in faith, may we seek to be people who are humble enough to say, “I’m sorry” when we’ve caused harm, and compassionate enough to extend forgiveness when others do the same.

And in this practice of repentance, may we reflect the heart of Christ, preparing the way for God's healing love to restore what has been fractured and to bring us closer to one another and to God. Amen.