

“SORRY SEEMS TO BE THE HARDEST WORD”

Matthew 18:21-35

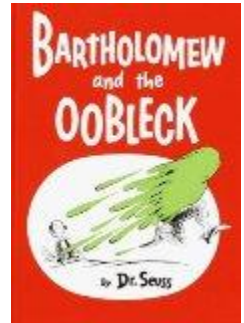
July 11, 2010

This summer, we are exploring Biblical concepts found in the works of Dr. Seuss. Today is no different, but the sermon title comes from a different source. Does anyone recognize it? It’s the title of an Elton John song, and it comes from the words in the refrain of that song:

It's sad, so sad
It's a sad, sad situation
And it's getting more and more absurd
It's sad, so sad
Why can't we talk it over
Oh it seems to me
That sorry seems to be the hardest word

Sorry seems to be the hardest word for many people to say. It runs parallel to another word or phrase that’s hard for many people to say – as illustrated in an episode of the classic sitcom *Happy Days*. In this particular episode, “the Fonz,” the essence of cool, makes a mistake and has to admit it. He tries in earnest to get the words out: “I was wr-----.” He struggles mightily and finally is able to spit out those words, “I was wrong.”

In the Dr. Seuss story *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, King Derwin of the Kingdom of Didd has a similar problem. Even though it would fix a big mess he has created, he cannot bring himself to say “I was wrong,” or “I’m sorry.” But I’m getting ahead of myself.



In the story, the king finds himself weary with the same old weather patterns year after year: rain in the spring, sun in the summer, fog in the fall, and snow in the winter (sounds a little like Minnesota, doesn’t it?). The king decides he wants something new – something different. Bartholomew, one of the king’s servants, tries to tell the king that, while he might be a powerful king, the sky was not something over which he could rule.

But the king (in addition to being powerful) was stubborn. He had his mind made up. He was going to change things. He called on his magicians who assured the king that he would have his wish. It would come the very next day in the form of something called “oobleck.” (We all know what oobleck is, right? No? Never heard of it? Maybe that’s because it comes from the same imagination that created Zax and Whoville and Sneetches [oops...I’m getting ahead of myself – the Sneetches are next week’s story]). If you want something with which to compare oobleck, think slime.

Well the next morning the king wakes up and pulls open the shades in his room and sees it – little green glops of oobleck raining down from the sky. He is thrilled! He decides to declare this day a holiday and orders the bell ringer to ring the town bell. But the bell won’t ring because it’s covered in thick, green, sticky stuff. Birds are stuck to their nests, and when the trumpeter tries to sound the alarm, his instrument gets clogged up with muck.

Oobleck sounded like such a good idea on paper. It was going to be something new, something exciting, something that exceeded everyone’s wildest expectations. Now it’s seen as something that caused more trouble than it’s worth.

Bartholomew tells the king he can end this whole disaster by saying two simple words: “I’m sorry.” But the king, like the Fonz, and like many of us, can’t do it. He’s too proud, too stuck in his ways, too powerful (he thinks) to have to admit that he was wrong.

Bartholomew looks the king straight in the eye and says, “You may be a mighty king. But you’re sitting in oobleck up to your chin. And so is everyone else in your land. And if you won’t even say you’re sorry, *you’re no sort of king at all!*”

Finally the king gives in. He acknowledges that Bartholomew is right. With heavy sobs, the king says the magic words: “I’m sorry.” Immediately the oobleck disappears and all is well in the kingdom again. All of a sudden rain and sun and fog and snow don’t seem quite so bad.

King Derwin of Didd is a fictional character, but his inability to say those two small yet critical words – I’m sorry – is all too real. In fact, for those of us in the non-fictional world called life, we find that Elton John is quite right – Sorry seems to be the hardest word.

This isn’t always the case. I think we’re pretty good at saying we’re sorry for the small stuff – arriving late for an appointment or engagement, bumping into someone in a crowded store, interrupting someone. But what about the big things? What about the father who comes to the realization after his kids are grown and out of the house that he spent far more time at work than he did with them – especially when they really needed him? What about the mother who for years has emotionally abused her children? What about the person we thought was a friend who, in a moment of weakness or bad judgment, betrays a trust or reveals confidential information?

We’ve all done it before. We’ve all crossed that line. We’ve all let someone down – sometimes in a small way, and other times in a much larger way. And we’ve all wrestled with doing the right thing and apologizing.

We’re far from alone. The Bible is filled with people who have made mistakes and errors in judgment. The Bible is filled with examples of people giving into temptation or surrendering to the lust for power. It began back in the Garden of Eden with Adam, and it continued with others who we regard as heroes of the faith: Jacob, Moses, David, Paul. At some point, in order to move on, all of these – and many others – had to summon the humility and courage to say the right words: “I’m sorry.”

It’s not a hard phrase to say – “I’m sorry.” Say it with me – “I’m sorry.” Two short words; three syllables in all. But the difficulty comes with what they represent. The person uttering these words has put his or herself in a very vulnerable position. What happens to the person hearing these words? What happens to the person speaking them? The possibilities are endless, and when we’re not certain of the outcome, the risk is greater.

Yet think about the Dr. Seuss story. When the king finally brought himself to say those words, the entire Kingdom of Didd was saved. In the real world – our world – these words have the power to save marriages, friendships, and families. How? Because these words represent more than a simple apology for deeds done. These words represent a turnaround, a new direction, a change of heart, a realization, sorrow, regret and compassion. Indeed, these two words signify new life, new hope, and a fresh start. Truly they are words of grace.

But there are other words of grace that we sometimes find hard so say. As hard as it is to say “I’m sorry,” it can be even more difficult for the hearer to respond with the powerful words, “I forgive you.” Without forgiveness, “I’m sorry” remains suspended, waiting for a response that reestablishes the connection, brings about reconciliation, fixes what was broken.

In our scripture reading for this morning, Peter comes to Jesus and asks him a question: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Apparently Peter was looking to draw a line in the sand. I’ll forgive five times...six times...even seven times. But the eighth – no way! Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Does this imply a line in the sand (albeit a much longer line than Peter wanted to draw)? I’ll forgive seventy seven times, but the seventy eighth – no way! Actually, the number is more metaphorical. In other translations, we actually find Jesus telling Peter “seventy times seven.” The point is not the number – the point is that forgiveness should come as often as needed.

Jesus goes on to illustrate this point by telling the story of the unforgiving servant. This servant had been forgiven by the king of a pretty big debt. But later, when this servant met another who owed him far less than he owed the king, he refused to forgive. The message at the end of that parable or story is that we can expect to be treated the way we treat others – or we can expect to be forgiven to the extent that we’re able to forgive others. What is it that we pray in the Lord’s Prayer? “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Forgiveness is, at its heart, an act of freedom. It grants the authority to another person to move on without being bound by past failures. But in forgiving, we not only free others, we also free ourselves to live on. If saying “I’m sorry” requires practice and spiritual maturity, saying “I forgive you” likely takes more. Both are freeing phrases. And if King Derwin of Didd or the Fonz can learn to say them, so can we...and so must we.

I’m sorry.

I forgive you.

AMEN.