

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

October 23, 2016

## **Words that Strengthen Faith: “Sorry.” “Help.” “Please.”**

*Naked Spirituality, part 2. Based on the book by Brian McLaren*

Psalm 51:1-4, I Chronicles 4:7-10. Mark 2:1-12

Last week we began a new series called “Naked Spirituality.” It is based by Brian McLaren book with the same title. Admittedly, the title is a little provocative, so I’m glad to see you are all fully clothed this morning. I wasn’t sure if “Naked Spirituality” bring more or less people on Sunday.

However, we are trying to expose something: false religion. We are trying to get beyond the cheap, easy-answers, shallow faith that leaves people feeling empty and unsatisfied. A lot of people say they are spiritual, but not religious. They say they love Jesus, but they can’t stand organized religion. So we are trying to address those concerns, those frustrations, by examining simple words and faith practices that lead to authentic Christian faith.

Last week’s three simple words were *Here, Thanks, and O!* - words that awaken our faith. “Here” is an expression of presence. It is important to remember God is always “here”...not just in the church, but everywhere you go. God wants to find us, and we want to be found by God. “Thanks,” is an expression of gratitude. As Katja read to the children a moment ago, big people love to hear “Thank you,” as does God. When we realize all that God has done in our lives and in the world, we can respond with gratitude. And finally, the word “O!”, we learned, is an expression of joy, like the Christmas song, “O Come, All Ye Faithful”. No matter what our circumstances are, we can know the joy God wants us to have from an authentic faith. “Here,” “Thanks,” and “O!” As we begin to really see God for who he is, these words help us respond to him.

But today we are going to wade deeper into the waters of faith and spirituality. Today I want to give you three words that strengthen our faith. They are “Sorry”, “Help”, and “Please.” Let’s look at each one.

Have you heard this phrase before? “I don’t want to go to church. It’s full of hypocrites.” Well, maybe we should embrace that reality. We are all hypocrites. We usually don’t go around wearing our failures on our sleeves. It would be more honest to just hang a sign on the front door to all of our churches, saying, “Let’s pretend!”

This is why we need to embrace the first word. “Sorry.” Let’s face it: it is hard to admit our mistakes. It is hard to say, “I’m sorry,” because you have to really mean it. Sorry is a word of confession. When I say, “I’m sorry,” I’m acknowledging what you already know. When I ask for forgiveness, I’m acknowledging what God already knows.

The bible illustrates the power of “Sorry” in the lives of Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David. Both of these kings sinned against God, but Saul never admitted his mistake. His impatience and arrogance cost him his throne. When the prophet Samuel confronted him for failing to follow God’s command, Saul had the audacity first to deny his wrongdoing, then to make excuses. But King David was different. When the prophet Nathan confronted David after the affair with Uriah’s wife and the murder to cover it up, David confessed. Listen to the words of Psalm 51:1-4, from David’s own hand.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.  
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.*

I can just imagine the tears on David's face as he wrote this. What shame he must have felt. But his example leads us to a powerful truth. When we confess our sin, when we say, "Sorry" and mean it, we release ourselves from the bondage that sin had over us. It takes a lot of negative energy to maintain our façade. It's stressful to always be a hypocrite. But when we truly confess our mistakes, we are free to be ourselves again.

We must confess to God, confess to others, and even admit to ourselves we have screwed up. McLaren offers this insight: "If a friend made a mistake, I would tell him it was okay, that nobody's perfect. But when I made a mistake, I would constantly beat myself up..." (McLaren, N.S., 111) Saying you're sorry is hard, but it's one of the best things you can do to love yourself. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: confession is like puking. And after we do it, we usually feel better.

I don't like admitting when I'm wrong, not to myself, and especially not to someone else. Pride prevents us from being vulnerable. But an amazing thing happens when we share those tightly held secrets with someone we trust. We find we are not alone. If I dare to share my confession with you, you can respond with compassion and love, rather than judgment. I cannot know mercy until I admit my need for it. And the mercy and grace we find in our companions allows us to more fully understand God's grace and forgiveness.

"Sorry" is a word of confession, and it is very powerful. (But, you have to mean it!) And then there's the next word, "Help." Help is a word of petition.

The story is told of an atheist who goes hiking in the mountains. Suddenly, an eight-foot tall grizzly bear jumps out of the bushes and roars. In complete panic, the man runs for his life, trips on a tree root, and falls to the ground. He rolls over and sees the bear right on top of him, raising his paw to strike him. The man cries out, "God, help me!"

Time stops. The bear freezes mid-swipe. The forest is silent.

A bright light shines down on the man, and God says, "You deny my existence for all of these years and even tell others I don't exist. And now you expect me to help you?"

The atheist says, "You're right, God. I would be a hypocrite to suddenly ask you to treat me as Christian now. So, perhaps could you make the bear a Christian?"

"Very well," says God.

The light disappears. The sounds and activity of the forest resume. The bear drops his paw...brings both paws together...bows his head...and speaks: "Lord, for this food which I am about to receive, I am truly thankful...AMEN!"

*[pause]*

As hard as it is to say, "Sorry," I think "Help" is even harder. To say help, we have to admit our own weakness. Does anybody else hate asking for directions? See what I mean? Again, we go to the bible to find a short but illuminating story of a man who asked for help.

1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 4:9-10 (NKJV):

*Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your*

*hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!" So God granted him what he requested.*

Jabez had a dubious start. His name literally means, "pain." But from that pain, he chose to tap into a greater power, to stop the cycle of pain before it continued. He found that power in God.

Let me say this about asking God for help. God is not some sort of cosmic vending machine. You don't put your prayer token in the slot, and wait for the answer to pop out. Brian McLaren puts it this way: "Immature petition tries to convince God to remake the world in our image for our convenience and ease, but mature petition asks God to remake us in God's own image, so that we can expand our capacity to respond to the world as it is."

We ask God for help because of our weakness. We cannot and we should not try to do everything. Bad things happen when I try to do things by myself. Take last Sunday, for instance. In my weakness, I tried to do everything, and the result was I ended up flat on my back, able to do nothing. But the leaders in this church stepped up to help, and as a result, worship could continue without me. I probably could have saved a trip to the ER if I had asked for help earlier.

There is a mystery to petition, to asking for help. Paul says in II Corinthians 12, in our weakness, God's power is made perfect. "For when I am weak, then I am strong." Christ can't use us when we are locked to the deception that "We are strong enough on our own." To the contrary, he says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ showed us the perfect prayer for help. “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42). As a result of this prayer, Jesus found the strength to do what love required. He died on the cross to save us. If even Jesus Christ asked for help, how can we not?

When we ask for help, we receive peace. When we ask for help, we show that we love ourselves, the way Christ meant when he said to love others as you love yourself.

So there is “Sorry,” the word of confession, and “Help,” the word of petition. Finally, there is the MAGIC word. You all know it. “Please.” Please is the word of intercession, of going between on behalf of someone else.

Think of it this way: if you are in an accident, your prayer is probably, “God, help me!” But, if you witness an accident, your prayer might be, “God, please, let them be OK.”

“Please” is a word of compassion. As we read earlier, the four friends in Mark had compassion on their friend the paralytic. These men literally carried the weight of their friend’s burden. They embodied their prayer and for their faith, they were rewarded. Isn’t that amazing? Wouldn’t it be amazing, if through our brokenness, confession, admission of weakness, that miracles would come to pass because we then responded to the pain of others?

This dynamic is illustrated beautifully in the sacrament of communion. In taking the bread and cup, we receive forgiveness again. But also, we are remembered, put back together, into the community of Christ. My weakness adds strength to the Body. My ability to receive the grace I could not afford reminds me of my desire to give that grace to others.

We have enough angry rhetoric in this world. There is too much blame going around, too many angry words. Too much hate. The world needs more compassion. And the followers of Jesus Christ should be the first and most recognizable ones to offer it. None of us would be here if someone else hadn't offered a "please" on our behalf. We wouldn't have a church, or a pastor, or a choir, or a Sunday School or a youth group or Bible studies or missionaries or a Halloween Outreach or a dozen other ministries if someone didn't pray for those who serve and those who are served by them. It is said that not one person comes to know Jesus Christ as their Savior unless someone else prayed for them. And I believe it.

I don't know about you, but I've seen enough arrogance in the world, especially among those who claim to follow Christ. I'd rather see some authentic, naked spirituality that actually strengthens the church. I'd rather hear, "Sorry. Help. Please." And I think you all do, too. Let's make these words a permanent and frequent part of our vocabulary.

**Benediction (adapted from St. Teresa)**

Christ has no body here but ours, no hand or feet here on earth but ours.  
Ours are the eyes through which he looks on this world with kindness.  
Ours are the hands through which he works. Ours are the feet on which he moves.  
Ours are the voices through which he speaks to this world with kindness.  
Through our touch, our smile, our listening ear,  
Embodied in us, Jesus is living here.  
So let us go now, filled with the Spirit, into this world  
With kindness.

Memory verse

Psalm 51:10

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

Reflection questions

1. When have you had to say “I’m sorry” to someone else? Was it hard for you? How did you feel after you apology?
2. When have you said, “I’m sorry” to God?
3. Why do people think someone is weak if they have to ask for help? How does our weakness reveal God’s strength?
4. When have you asked for help? Do you need help right now? Whom will you ask?
5. Do you regularly pray for someone? Whom? If not, whom could you pray for?
6. Thoughts for further reflection:

*“Pain that isn’t processed is passed on. Pain that isn’t transformed is transmitted.”* Fr Richard Rohr.

*“If we don’t bring our disappointment to God, we will blame our disappointment on God, thus alienating ourselves from the best hope of comfort and strength.”* Brian McLaren in Naked Spirituality, p120.