

McCabe United Methodist Church

New Year, New Chapter Series

Six Words: “I Am Sorry” & “I Forgive You”

Sermon on Ephesians 4:1-6, 25-32 (1/7 & 1/8/17)

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Most holy God, grant that what we speak with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Eveline [pronounced EH-vuh-leen] was a happy girl. Like most girls, happy or not happy, Eveline had a shadow that followed her around. Unlike most girls, [though,] Eveline's shadow became unstuck one day.

“Her shadow looked just like her and talked just like her. Wherever Eveline’s shadow went people thought it was Eveline. And that was bad. Eveline’s shadow wasn’t nice and liked to hurt people. And Eveline never could explain that the shadow wasn’t her and that she wasn’t the shadow.

“One day her shadow shut her up in a room. And Eveline watched her shadow from afar. And Eveline’s shadow hurt all the people Eveline cared about. Eveline began to cry. While she was crying a mouse came and asked her why she was crying.

“Eveline told the mouse about the shadow and that it had shut her up in the room and was out hurting people. The mouse asked her why she didn’t leave the room and tell the shadow to stop. Eveline had not thought of doing that. She tried the door. It was unlocked! Eveline left the room and went to find her shadow.

“She had not gotten far when she found it right in front of her. Her first thought on seeing her shadow was to run back into the room, but Eveline decided to be brave like people in the stories her parents had read to her. So Eveline faced her shadow and told it to go back where it belonged. And the shadow did what she said.

“When her shadow was back in its place Eveline could go try to help the people that had been hurt by her shadow.”

Isn't that a cute little story? *I* think it's a cute story and I like *almost* everything about it.

I like the little girl, Eveline – I like that she's happy. I like the creativity of the story and I really like the idea of the shadow. I like the shadow because, I think it resonates with our own human nature: so often we want to be happy, to do good things for those we love – and to do good things for folks we don't even know.

But we all have a shadow side and sometimes that shadow side gets the better of us and we end up hurting people. I love the way this little story illustrates that.

I love that, when Eveline's shadow goes out hurting people, Eveline then tries to explain to people that it was not *her* out there, but her *shadow* doing the hurting – she's blaming a little, but who wouldn't? We don't usually *want* to admit when we've done something hurtful.

I also love in this story that Eveline's shadow gets away from her, that she's able to watch her shadow hurting everyone she loves... and that she thinks she's helpless to cage her shadow.

I even love that it was something as simple as a little mouse telling Eveline what she needed to do to get her shadow to stop hurting people. I love that because isn't that how it goes sometimes? The simple solutions seem to be the toughest to accomplish.

I love this part of the story because it suggests we have some responsibility for our sins: when our bad sides – our “shadows” – hurt us or others, it *is* our responsibility to help make things right again.

Anyway, so, I *do* love almost everything about the story of little Eveline and her destructive shadow.

What I *do not* love about this story is that I received it about 15 years ago from a guy I had broken-up with a couple days earlier. He had written it as a sort of cruel “parting gift.” Through this story, it seemed to me he was saying that, like the girl whose name was “Eveline” – or maybe “**E**eveline” – I had an *evil* shadow that was out hurting people left and right.

What’s worse, the name “Eveline” is obviously taken from the name “Eve.” And, for those of us familiar with the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 2, we know Eve often gets the bad reputation of being a vile temptress who first brought sin into the world.

So, through this cute little story, some 15 years ago, my new “ex” seemed to be suggesting that, like Eve herself, I, too, was somehow responsible for all of the sin in the world.

Since I had just broken-up with the guy, and since I knew him pretty well, I assumed that, through his little story, he was purposefully exaggerating and trying to make me feel bad. And it *did*, in fact, make me feel bad. I didn't like that I had hurt him by ending our relationship... but we weren't right for each other. The break-up was painful, but necessary.

However, while this story made me feel bad at first, now I'm very grateful to that guy who, years ago, gave me a great story to use when considering the topics of sin and forgiveness.

In my home church growing-up, I don't recall hearing all that much about “sin.” It wasn't that our pastors and teachers didn't believe in sin... it was just that I don't remember hearing about it. And, frankly, I didn't like thinking about it much either.

In our larger Christian culture, the concept of *sin* often seems to be used as a weapon against others – a weapon of judgment used to evaluate the behavior of *other* people and perhaps not so much to evaluate our *own* behavior.

On the contrary, “sin” is a word we in the church have been given to use – not, primarily, so we can be judgmental and nasty, calling *other* people “sinners”... but rather, we are given the word “sin” to use because it teaches us something about *ourselves*.

There is something at the very core of our being – something in our very nature – that often causes conflict within ourselves... something causing that shadow to emerge and to sometimes get away from us... something causing us to stray from God's ideal path – something that creates distance between ourselves and God, distance between ourselves and others. This *something* is “sin.”

You'll likely hear more about this in Pastor Mark's message next week, but, while we humans were created in God's good image, that good image has some tarnish. We humans are reflections of God, but no reflection is fully the thing it reflects, right?

We are *imperfect* reflections – *imperfect* images – of our perfect God. And sin is the *thing* that keeps us from being perfect images – more perfect reflections of our good and perfect God.

Sin is the conflict within, the “little devil on one shoulder,” the shadow that causes us to have harmful thoughts about ourselves and others. Sin also causes us to *do* things that are harmful to ourselves and others.

Those harmful thoughts and actions damage our relationships with others...and, in the process, our harmful thoughts and actions damage our relationship with God. Thus, our very human need for forgiveness.

Forgiveness, generally, is the theme for this sermon series we're starting today. Pastor Mark and I chose the series title “New Year, New Chapter” because forgiveness is just that: saying goodbye to certain sins, certain harmful thoughts and behaviors... and turning the page to a new chapter of life – a new chapter no longer centered around the harm of the past.

Forgiveness is found in the turning of the page toward the new chapter. And, because forgiveness is divine in nature, as we go through this series,

we need to keep in mind that, when it comes to forgiveness, we are not the ones doing the page turning. That's God's job.

Like it says in our reading from Ephesians 4:

“We are part of the same body ... Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others. Don't yell at one another or curse each other or ever be rude.

“Instead be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ.”

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As we go through this *New Year, New Chapter* series, Pastor Mark and I will be informed not only by the Bible, but also by Rev. Adam Hamilton's book *Forgiveness: Finding Peace Through Letting Go*.

The preface of this book is entitled “Six Words,” and, in the preface, Adam Hamilton writes this: “[It is] an inescapable fact of human nature [that] we are bound to hurt others, and others are bound to hurt us. If we are to live successfully, and if we are ever to know freedom and joy, these six words must be a regular part of our vocabulary: 'I am sorry' and 'I forgive you.'

“If we lack the ability to say, 'I am sorry,' life will be immeasurably more difficult than it needs to be.

“[And if] we can't bring ourselves to say, 'I forgive you,' life will be filled with bitterness and pain.”¹

“I am sorry” and “I forgive you.” Were there ever six words more difficult to say and live?

1 Hamilton, Adam. *Forgiveness: Finding Peace Through Letting Go*. 1-2.

I don't know about you all, but it is not my natural instinct to be genuinely apologetic or forgiving: on the one hand, I try very hard not to do or say hurtful things... but, on the other hand, I can be extremely proud when I *have* done or said something hurtful. Saying "I am sorry" is not easy for me, even though I know how important it is to say when I've been hurtful.

In addition to having a hard time apologizing, I also excel at nursing grudges. If someone has hurt *me*, woe to them!

Now, I'm generally not vengeful, and I can *usually* keep myself from saying cruel things to someone's face, even if they've been cruel to me... but, when I know someone is trying to hurt me, many ugly things get said in my head and many ugly things get spoken to my confidantes.

And that's not good. It's not faithful. It's *human*... but it's not healthy. Again, St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4,

"Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others ... Instead be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ."

In order to follow these instructions of St. Paul's, we must allow God to mold us and shape us... to make us *new*. Like the title of Adam Hamilton's book suggests, *forgiveness* is about "finding peace through letting go" of attitudes and behaviors that are unhealthy... letting go of attitudes and behaviors that poison our souls and harden our hearts.

During this *New Year, New Chapter* series, we invite you to help God make you new in ways that will bring peace to your heart where peace is needed.

You may have noticed the insert in the bulletin that lifts up an invitation we are extending to you to adopt a new prayer discipline: the discipline of praying a specific word.

As explained on that insert, this idea of praying a specific word is based on something called "breath prayer."

Breath prayer is a way of praying wherein, at particular times, you quietly pray a simple word or phrase. For example, you hear an ambulance siren go off, so you breathe in and, on your exhale, you pray the word, “Help.” Or, you are facing a critical decision, so you breathe in and, on your exhale, you pray, “Guide me.”

As we enter into this New Year, we are going to assign a particular prayer word to each sermon series. Then, for the duration of the series, we hope you will consider praying on the word we've chosen as a way of inviting God to work in you in that particular way. The prayer word we chose for this series on forgiveness is the word “**new**”.

The concept of forgiveness is all about the *new* life we are offered in Jesus Christ:

- *new* life to be unburdened from our sin,
- *new* life in the midst of relationships that have broken,
- *new* life in our communities when there has been unrest ...
- *new* life to say “I am sorry” when we *should* say it for the sake of an important relationship ... and
- *new* life to say “I forgive you” when we *need* to say it in order to bring peace to our hearts.

We hope you will take seriously this invitation to pray on the word “new.” It might feel like a strange way of praying – at first – but I hope you will keep it up for the duration of this series.

For the moment, in the spirit of practicing how to say “I am sorry,” and in the spirit of opening ourselves to God speaking the words, “I forgive you,” let us now join together in our prayer of confession. [It's number 890 in the red hymnal.]

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

Most Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us, that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen

Friends in Christ, the sacrament of baptism is a celebration of the forgiving love God – a celebration of the new life we have in Jesus. So what better way to begin this *New Year, New Chapter* series than by celebrating and giving thanks for the gift of baptism. I now invite you to turn to our liturgy for the Celebration of Baptismal Remembrance, found in the insert in your bulletins ...