“I’M SORRY!”
A Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 15, 2013

I learned an interesting etymological fact this week. I looked up “quintessence,” since, I thought, this Sunday’s Gospel reading is “quintessentially” the message of Jesus.

Quintessence, or “fifth essence,” comes from ancient Greek philosophy. We all know that they described the world as being made up of four essences: earth, air, fire, and water. Everything that is, is composed from those four elemental essences. But, according to some of them, there is a fifth essence which underlies them all, from which those four essences originate! That is the “quintessence.”

So, I want you to see that the message encased in these two parables, about a lost sheep and a lost coin, are—in a nutshell—the message of Jesus. The good word of the Gospel. What Jesus was “all about.” There is a third story in that chapter of Luke, commonly called the Prodigal Son, which must be understood alongside these two parables. Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son—and what God does about the situation. That’s the essential story of the Bible. If we get the meaning in this parable, we will understand the quintessence of Jesus. What Jesus is looking for.

For Jesus asserts here, and illustrates with three parables, that what pleases God is for us to be sorry. It is the repentance of sinners that God is after, rather than the good deeds of the “righteous”! These are pithy parables, and there can be no misunderstanding what Jesus means by them.

Now, to repent means to be sorry. And being sorry is tough. “I’m sorry” is a bitter pill—when we are the ones who have to say it. It hurts to say. On the other hand, there can be nothing sweeter to hear, when someone else is saying it to us! So we’re conflicted about “I’m sorry.” Is it music? Or is it pain?

There is a lot of confusion about what “I’m sorry” means. Today, I’m not going address all the possible meanings. But I want to make clearer what it should mean to Christians.

First, and this is most important, “I’m sorry” is when you engage in finger-pointing . . . at yourself. We all point the finger often enough at others. But when you say “I’m sorry,” you are not doing someone else’s repentance—you’re doing your own.

Hypocrites are basically people who are “insufficiently critical.” They are “hypo”—that means under—“critics”—people who judge. Hypo-crites are not thorough in judgment. And the thing hypocrites most often leave off their agenda is to take a look in the mirror and see what is wrong with themselves.
Jim Collins, author of “From Good to Great,” discovered that CEO’s who are able to take good companies and make them great share one characteristic more than any other: They tend to blame themselves for what is not going right in their companies, and give credit to others for what is going well. Poor CEO’s tend to do the opposite. But this doesn’t just apply to running a business. Collins has put his finger on one of the most common forms of hypocrisy, in Jesus’ teaching. Christians who find fault with others run the risk of becoming such hypocrites.

2) Christians are sorry toward God.

True, it is essential to say “I’m sorry” to people we hurt, either by our actions or by our failures to act. But Christians also take another step and say “I have sinned” to God, when we offend against God by hurting his children.

3) Christians say “I’m sorry” en masse. There is something comforting about the fact that we assemble, all face forward, and say together “We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.” Even temporary misery loves company, and it is not a happy thought that we are in bondage to sin.

4) Christians say “I’m sorry” to God as a step in the direction of being better. Sometimes, people say “I’m sorry just to deflect consequences for something they have done wrong. Not so with Christians. “I’m sorry is just the beginning. Look at our order for Confession and Forgiveness: “Give us the power of your Holy Spirit so that we may a) confess our sin, b) receive your forgiveness, and c) grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ.”

5) Christians say “I’m sorry” thoroughly. Apology is not something we do on certain occasions, like just after we get caught doing a particular thing wrong. Our “I’m sorry” is utterly comprehensive. Listen to how totally sorry we are, again, in the Confession at the beginning of our service. We slice sin three ways: a) “We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed.” B) “We have sinned against you . . . by what we have done and by what we have left undone.” C) “We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

6) Christians accompany our request for God’s forgiveness with a promise that we will ourselves be forgiving to those who offend against us: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Next Sunday, we’ll read the parable about the steward whose eyes were opened to the power there is in forgiving the sins of others.

7) Christians confess expectantly. We expect to be forgiven. Forgiveness has been promised us by Jesus, who told us we led us to believe that we would be forgiven. Remember the man in the temple who hit himself in the chest while saying “Lord, be
merciful to me, a sinner”? That’s all he did, and yet Jesus said “That one went home justified.”

It made good people crazy, people who worked hard for their righteousness, people who obeyed all the commandments, to have Jesus elevate sinners to their level, as though they were just as holy. We call it “getting away with” something, when people don’t have to do the time when they have done the crime.

8) Christians know that joy attaches to repentance. Today’s parables say so. The punch line in both parables is “JOY.” Scenes of celebration accompany the recovery of a lost sheep and a missing coin. And the joy is not only the joy of the sheep or the coin. It is the joy of God. The one who said of creation, “It is good.” When the lost is recovered, God does not say “It is good,” he says “It is terrific.”

9) This is the flip side of 7 and 8, that Christians confess without fear. “I’m sorry” is, among other things, an admission of a painful truth—responsibility for evil. We don’t do that lightly. We are mindful that one must put one’s best foot forward, toot one’s own horn, look after number one. We are adversarial in our dealings with others. If they find us out, well, we’ll apologize; but no need to run the risk of upsetting them by telling them before they discover how we’ve hurt them. “What they don’t know will never hurt them.” Christians are not afraid of this, because of the promise we have of forgiveness from God.

If you need reminding of what it means for a Christian to say “I’m sorry,” just review the words of the confession and forgiveness which we use in the Communion service. It’s all there—what I’ve enumerated.

When I was nine, my family moved to an area with a different culture, whose words and ways I did not understand. I had grown up in North Dakota, but we moved to Harlan County, Kentucky.

One day, at school, I bumped into a classmate and—as I had been brought up to do—I apologized. I said, “I’m sorry.

He didn’t miss a beat. He replied, and I will not attempt the accent, “If you’re sorry, I wonder what the rest of your family looks like.”

Well, my family are all just as sorry as I am. We’re all sorry. (I’m talking about you.) Sorry that in a world filled with grace and beauty, we can’t be better to one another. In fact, we’re so sorry we get together once in a while, at church, and tell God how sorry
we are. We read about Jesus, we even sometimes read from the letters of Paul, and he was about the sorriest fellow there ever was.

Now that I think about it, the answer to my friend’s question (“If you’re sorry, I wonder what the rest of your family looks like!”) was that the rest of my family looks like . . . the church, my brothers and sisters who are just as sorry—and equally as forgiven—as I am.

The great thing is, God doesn’t think sorry people are “sorry critters.” He tells us we’re terrific, we’re his children, and he gives us his own Spirit to make it in life. God, in fact, is very happy with us, rejoices over us, and numbers us among his own flock. God feeds us, gives us work, promises us protection . . . what more could we ask for? Amen.