

***“The Gospels According to Dr. Seuss:
Bartholomew and the Oobleck”***

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Matthew 23:11-12

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Matthew 6:9-15

“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

So far, our summer sermon series on *The Gospels According To Dr. Seuss* has included some favorite and some lesser-known rhyming stories, like *The Cat in the Hat* and *What Was I Scared Of?* Today's tale, published in 1959, is different. It still comes with a lesson to be learned but *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* is prose instead of rhyme. Until last month, I don't believe I'd ever read it. In case you haven't read it either, here's a synopsis. King Derwin of the Kingdom of Didd is discontented. While we have all experienced discontent at one time or another, King Derwin has trouble with... the sky. In spring it sends rain. In summer, sunshine. In autumn, fog and in winter, of course, snow. King Derwin has grown bored with the familiar. He wants something different. Something new.

His page, Bartholomew, the hero of the story, tries to caution the king; while he has power over many things, the sky is beyond his reach. King Derwin will not be persuaded. He calls for his royal magicians who work through the night to give the king something different.

The next morning Bartholomew awakens to small green flecks of oobleck raining down. King Derwin is elated. He sends Bartholomew to the royal bell ringer to declare a holiday. Yet as Bartholomew runs to the bell ringer's tower the droplets grow. And the oobleck is so sticky the bell can't ring. Likewise, when Bartholomew runs to the royal trumpeter, he can't sound the alarm because his horn gets gunked up. And so it continues as the oobleck pelts the kingdom in ever larger globs. Farmers get stuck to plows. Goats to ducks. Geese to cows. The oobleck breaks into the palace. The royal cook gets stuck to his stewpots and the fiddlers to their fiddles.

Bartholomew runs to the throne room where he finds the king glued to his throne. “Trembling, shaking, as helpless as a baby,” King Derwin is at a loss. What can he do? Since the royal magicians are trapped in their cave, he tries to remember the magic words. Seuss continues:

“Bartholomew Cubbins could hold his tongue no longer. ... Don’t waste your time saying foolish magic words. YOU ought to be saying some plain simple words.”

“What?...”

“This is all your fault. Now, the least you can do is say the simple words, “I’m sorry.””

King Derwin rebels at first. Kings don’t do that. Bartholomew looks him straight in the eye.

“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 the king at all!”

In the end, the king admits that Bartholomew is right. and says that he’s “so awfully, awfully sorry!” The sun starts shining, it stops oobleck-ing and all melts away. THE END.

What a silly story! No one has trouble saying they're sorry! It's easy – two words, three syllables. We say it all the time. I bump into someone in line; you're a couple minutes late for an appointment. “Sorry.” And it's forgotten as soon as it’s said.

But, of course, it's not that easy. A young man breaks a heart because he doesn't tell them he's already engaged. Parents’ conflict and anger corrupts their children sense of peace and safety. A friend unthinkingly betrays a trust. No, saying “I'm sorry” is not easy.

During a Children’s Message one Sunday, the leader asked the children what the Bible is about. One youngster replied, “It's all about good people!” Good guess, but really, it's not. When we read our Bibles, we find many people who were not so good. They had lapses in judgment. Or succumbed to temptation. Or lusted after power. We see this from Adam to Moses to Jesus’ disciples. All of them, and many others, had to learn humility and practice courage. All had to learn to admit their errors. It didn't matter who they were.

The difficulty in saying “I’m sorry” has nothing to do with the words themselves. It's what they represent. These words are self-effacing. When we say them and mean them, we are practicing humility. We make ourselves vulnerable. Most people are uncomfortable with being vulnerable. We feel exposed. And yet, the potential effects of saying “I'm sorry” are profound. In today’s story, these words saved an entire kingdom. In our lives, they have the power to save and heal marriages, friendships, and all sorts of other relationships. Their power is found in what they represent – a change of hearts, compassion, a new direction. This is actually what the word repent means – to turn and go in another direction.

Our mistakes may not be as foolish as King Derwin’s but we all make them. Where would we be without the hope of a fresh start? ... if there was no way to move past the hurt that mistakes cause? What if each mistake we or somebody else made meant the end?! These words “I'm sorry” truly are wonderful words of life. People who are unable to say them miss out on a vital piece of living well with others

Of course, “I’m sorry” or “Forgive me” is but one part of the healing process. We may say “I'm sorry” and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. But how well do we hear and accept these words from someone else.

There are times when saying “I forgive you” seems hard or even impossible. Maybe you can think of a time when you’ve let the words hang in the air, unable or unwilling to mend the breach. This is complicated more by some people’s notion of “Forgive and forget” or it’s not forgiveness. Get rid of that idea! God may wipe the slate clean each moment of our lives so that we can always start afresh. But there are plenty of times when we dare not forget.

The human experience is full of people using power inappropriately. They might forgive an abuser but they will always remember. She will never risk further exploitation. He will guard his safety. This does not mean they can’t or don’t forgive.

Each Sunday we pray together, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Does this really mean that God won’t forgive us if we don’t forgive? No. Rather than being about punishment, “forgive us as we forgive others” is meant to help us understand that when we cannot or will not forgive, we are missing the freeing power that comes as we release a burden.

We each need to wrestle with our ability to forgive. It may come easily for some but not everyone. There are circumstances in which forgiveness may seem impossible. We don’t know each other’s stories, and it’s not for us to judge.

My brother-in-law Vince used to say that courtesies are the grease that keep civilization going. “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you” are tools that allow us to mend relationships. Forgiveness is in truth an act of freedom, one which allows another to move on yet also allows us to step beyond a circumstance that may have haunted us. Letting ourselves live in the present is a gift we give ourselves.

Within ourselves, we have the capacity each day to do wrong or right. We talked about this last week when we looked at the Grinch. Beyond nature and nurture, we have the capacity to choose, and we do. Sometimes, we might feel like Paul – both bad and good at the same time. We believe that God wills wholeness for us and we want to live in that wholeness. Yet so often, our attitudes, thoughts and behaviors are far from what we would have them be.

This is the human experience. We all share in it. John Wesley, founder of the Methodism, spoke of growing toward perfection. But the perfection he was talking about is not being mistake-free. That’s impossible. Perfection, in the traditional Methodist understanding, means we strive for spiritual maturity. We achieve perfection as we continue to grow in God’s likeness.

So when, like King Derwin, you, or someone else, does something foolish, or even hurtful, allow yourselves the grace of forgiveness. Wherever you are able, say, “I’m sorry.” Offer and accept the gift of forgiveness. And grow in God.

Amen.