

CAN YOU SAY ‘I’M SORRY’?

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
The Sunday after Yom Kippur
John Buehrens, Minister

Reading

“Mistakes Were Made”
Freedom, a novel

Jonathan Franzen

[I]t was hard not to imagine better ways for things to have gone. It was all such a fore-taste of the late-night scenes of later years. Walter’s beautiful rage going wasted while she wept and he punished her and apologized for punishing her, saying that they were both exhausted and it was very late, which indeed it was: so late that it was early.

“I’m going to take a bath,” she said finally.

He was sitting on the other bed, his face in his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said. “This is truly not about you.” [He had said that earlier.]

“Actually, you know what?” [she said], “That is not my very favorite thing to keep hearing.”

“I’m sorry. Believe it or not, I mean something nice by it.”

“And ‘sorry’ is not really high on my list at this point either.”

Without taking his hands from his face, he asked if she needed help with the bath.

“I’m fine,” she said, although it was something of a production to bathe with her braced and bandaged knee propped up outside the water. When she emerged from the bathroom in her pajamas, half an hour later, Walter appeared not to have moved a muscle. She stood in front of him, looking down at his fair curls and narrow shoulders. “Listen, Walter, she said, “I can leave in the morning if you want. But I need to get some sleep now. You should go to bed, too.”

He nodded.

I’m sorry I went to Chicago with Richard. It was my idea, not his. You should blame me, not him. But right now? Your making me feel kind of shitty.”

He nodded and stood up.

“Kiss me good night?” she said.

He did, and it was better than fighting, so much better that soon they were under the covers and turning off the lamp. Daylight was leaking in around the curtains. . .

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I have a confession to make. This week, despite a rather heavy schedule on many fronts, in which I may have let some of you down, I took time for a guilty pleasure: finishing a novel. I’d heard Jonathan Franzen interviewed on NPR’s “Fresh Air,” with Terry Gross. He was talking about his latest novel, *Freedom*. Some years ago Franzen got the National Book Award for his earlier novel, *The Corrections*, causing a small stir when he declined the honor of going on Oprah, saying that he was afraid that her endorsement would cause men not to read it. So Oprah took the book off her list back then. But she must have forgiven him, because the new book is again one of her selections. Franzen writes the kind of fiction that makes connections between the texture of domestic, interpersonal life in our culture and bigger public trends.

I had already chosen my title for today’s sermon. “Can you say ‘I’m sorry’?” is something I heard a parent saying to a child on a beach this summer. The child had taken a sand pail belonging to another youngster, causing crying and tears. The parent had intervened. I was sitting nearby, reading *The New York Times*. It contained a piece about the financial crisis, written by David Stockman. Some of you may recognize his name. Stockman was Budget Director for Ronald Reagan in the early 80s. Since then he’s been on Wall Street. I first met him forty years ago at Harvard Divinity School. His article was remarkable for a staunch Republican. It blamed the collapse of the economy on the policies of his own party. It started off by saying, “If there were such a thing as Chapter 11 for politicians, the Republican push to extend the unaffordable Bush tax cuts would amount to a bankruptcy filing.”

This is not the first time Mr. Stockman has recalled that confession is good for the soul. Back in the 80s, when he and Mr. Reagan were doubling the national debt, he admitted to William Grieder of *The Atlantic* that he had never really believed that tax cuts alone would cause output and employment to rise, and that tax deals cut with groups like the oil industry constituted “the hogs really feeding” at the public trough. Now he’s prepared to go much further, blaming borrowing from abroad, the huge public debt, the speculative bubbles that caused the collapse, and shipping of jobs overseas, all on what George Bush Senior once called “voodoo economics.”

Without, however, ever quite saying, “I’m sorry.” Just that it is “unseemly for the Senate minority leader, Mitch McConnell, to insist that the nation’s wealthiest taxpayers be spared even a three-percentage point rate increase,” in a time that “screams out . . . for sacrifice.”

Let’s admit this much, however. This is a democracy. The mess we are in is one in which few accept responsibility, yet all of us have been complicit. For thirty years now, led by my generation and Stockman’s, the baby-boomers, we have been acting out a collective form of entitlement. We have elected public officials who told us what we wanted to hear. Most basically, that we can have something for nothing; that we could live beyond our means with no consequences; that we’re entitled to that, as free Americans. And if something bad goes wrong, well then someone else must be to blame. As the Australian-born critic Robert Hughes said in his 1993, *The Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, we Americans have raised the art of blaming others almost to an art form. It’s why our politics are not merely nasty and polarized, but almost atomized, with fingers of blame pointing many directions, and clear majorities, capable of following their own principles with any consistency, harder and harder to come by.

Last December, in his speech to the nation about escalating the war in Afghanistan, President Obama talked about America’s role in the world and said, in a massive understatement, “We have not always been thanked for [our] efforts, and we have at times made mistakes.”

“Mistakes Were Made.” In Franzen’s novel, that’s the title of a several-chapter-length autobiography by Patty Berglund. Our reading was an excerpt, composed at her therapist’s suggestion. It begins, of course, with mistakes Patty’s parents made. As Philip Larkin wrote,

They [mess] us up, our mums and dads,
They may not mean to, but they do.
They hand on all the faults they had.
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were [messed] up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats
Who half the time were sappy-stern
And half at one another’s throats.

Man hands on misery to man
It deepens like the coastal shelf.
Get out as quickly as you can.
And don’t have any kids yourself.

As another critic put it, Larkin so accurately captures our despair as to render it absurd. So does Jonathan Franzen. His protagonists, Walter and Patty, get back at their parents by raising their children with the freedom they feel they were denied, then end up raising children who act out in ways they indulge but can't abide. Ah, the idolatry of freedom – with no responsibility! And then they rage at them – out of their own depression.

Do you remember that icky baby boom novel, *Love Story*, or the film with Ryan O'Neal and Ally Sheed? The one in which her line is "Love means never having to say you're sorry."? Well, I'm here to tell you: mistakes were made – by my generation like every other. I'm sorry. And I know: even if I mean it, so what? It's like the Pope speaking in England yesterday, apologizing to those who were victimized for priests who were then protected by the hierarchy.

One of the things Franzen talked about to Terry Gross was the blurring of boundaries between adults and children. It is not just that so many adults today never grow up, feel entitled, never take responsibility and seek cheap forgiveness. It's also, in my observation, that too many children are over-protected, over-programmed, and exist as narcissistic projections of their parents thwarted dreams. So they never have a real and free childhood.

Franzen does a good job, in portraying Walter and Patty, who come from mixed religious backgrounds – Walter from alcoholic Lutherans on the edge of Lake Woebegone, Patty from a Jewish mother and a WASP father, married in a Unitarian church they don't seem to attend – does a good job showing how educated lefties who despise the conventional religious ideas of many ordinary people miss how important it is for people to have a structure in which to confess, "I have fallen short. I have spoken or acted out of my depression, anger, or my blame of others. Let me now resolve at least offer to reconcile with those whom I know or suspect I've offended."

Mind you, Franzen never explicitly says *any* of this. This is *my* reading between his lines. What he does dramatize, at both the domestic and public level, is current epidemic of depression and anger: anger from folks in the Tea Party; depression among liberals who now seem to think, "Well, I meant well. Why don't they get that?" Only toward the end of the novel does Franzen suggest what I have felt for years: "Could it be because you don't actually talk to them? Listen?"

And then he brings it back home. Actually, being a mature, responsible adult means often having to say, "I'm sorry." Even without any entitlement to forgiveness. Depressed people, unaware of how angry they are often say, "I'm sorry for existing. Everything I've done is wrong. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry." That happens in the novel more than once. The words mean little.

Please understand me. I think *that*, to use a theological term, SUCKS. And will not do. Here's the trick. It has to do with accepting your fallibility and that of your fellow human beings. Psychologist and anthropologist Mary Pipher, a Unitarian Universalist out in Lincoln, Nebraska, author of *Reviving Ophelia* and a dozen other books, once put it quite succinctly as a method for staying in covenantal relationship with a spouse, partner, co-worker, this community, me, even the democratic process in which we are all free (if not entirely responsible) participants:

“Try getting up in the morning, looking in the mirror, and then saying several times: “You know, you're no prize either!” It's an adult thing to do. It'll help you face the day.

And now – I'm sorry – let's try to say together a modern version of the traditional Jewish prayer for Yom Kippur, the Kol Nidre, which says all that and more.

Kol Nidre means “all vows.” It is not only a confession of those broken, but an honest reminder of our fallible, shared humanity, recognition of which is the beginning of compassion for others.

*May each of us come to know a gentleness
that transcends force and melts hardness of heart.*

Then shall we be sensitive to the needs of others and responsive to their pleas:

Right: All who struggle vainly for attention;

Left: And those who shrink from another's touch;

R: All whose ambition exceeds their skill;

*L: And those whose early promise has dimmed to
small achievement;*

R: All whose minds are clouded or weak;

L: And those who are burdened with broken bodies;

R: All who wait in pain only for death;

L: And those who wait for news that never comes;

R: Those who are unloved, with none to love;

L: All who are alone & lonely, neglected or abandoned;

R: All who are deprived by the callousness of others;

*L: We acknowledge our faults and our failings;
R: failing to work for peace;
L: keeping silent in the face of injustice;
R: ignoring those who suffer in distant lands;
L: forgetting the poor in our own midst;
R: We have withheld love from those who depend on us.
L: We have distorted the truth for our own advantage.
R: We have conformed to fashion and not to conscience.
L: We have sinned against ourselves and not risen to
 fulfill the best that is in us.*

For what we have done and failed to do, for we may yet do, we ask for pardon. For rash words, broken pledges, insincere assurances and foolish promises, may we find forgiveness. Following ancient tradition, let us say together in unison:

I hereby forgive whoever has hurt me, whoever had done me any wrong whether deliberately or by accident, whether by word or by deed. As I forgive and pardon fully those who have done me wrong, may no one be punished on my account. I shall seek out those whom I have harmed and ask them to forgive and pardon me, whether I acted deliberately or by accident by word or by deed. May I not willfully repeat the wrongs I have done. May justice rule the world giving joy to the land, happiness to the city, renewed strength and light to all people. Amen.

