

Two of the most powerful phrases you can say to another person are also the two phrases that will also make you most vulnerable: “I love you” and “I’m sorry.” I discovered this when I was made local superior of a Jesuit community for the first time. We were a small community, only four of us, but the work in which we were engaged was intense. Two of us were working with Jesuit novices at the novitiate. The novitiate period is intense because during those two years the man who enters the Jesuits is confirming whether priesthood and religious life is really what he wants and the Jesuits for their part are testing the man’s vocation to make sure it is authentic. Some men leave during that time; some are asked to leave; and the rest take life-long vows at the end of the novitiate period. The other two Jesuits in the community directed a small film production company to bring a Catholic influence to Hollywood. And their work was intense because, well, it was Hollywood; everything is intense in Hollywood.

As a new, inexperienced superior, I had managed to really upset two of the guys. For days we walked around each other as though there were invisible walls that prevented real contact or communication. We had a community meeting coming up, and I

2

knew I would have to deal with this situation, but also, that it would be easier if everyone in the community was angry with me. I found an opportunity to annoy the third guy before our meeting so as we gathered in the living room for our regular community get-together, everyone was angry with me. I began the meeting by acknowledging that I had angered everyone, then I apologized. “I’m sorry,” I said, “I made mistakes that have annoyed and upset you, and I apologize.” My apology began an avalanche of apologies, admissions of mistakes, understanding and support. The walls came tumbling down and we had one of our best meetings.

I learned that my role in the community as superior was to say two things as frequently as possible: “I’m sorry,” and “thank you.” [In a community of men, “thank you” substitutes for “I love you” because, well, guys are guys, and “I love you” is reserved for God and deathbed conversations.] Whenever I said, “I’m sorry,” it allowed the other person to drop his defenses and safely tell me whatever was happening. I learned that it was important to say, “I’m sorry,” even when I had nothing to do with what was hurting or injuring one of the men because the

3

world is not fair or kind and often there is no one else who can acknowledge the bruises or deeper hurts that we carry.

Forgiveness is wonderful, a grace, a blessing. But it often has to begin with an apology. “I’m sorry” opens the door for grace to enter in. “Thank you” was a way of saying, “I see the good you do and I’m really glad you are around.” It’s kind of a low-level “I love you” sometimes as much as we fragile men can manage.

In the gospel Jesus urges us all, “Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned.” In my experience, most judgment and condemnation are defenses. Someone or something has injured me, compromised me, or in some way made me feel threatened so I throw up what defenses are available to me. Often enough that means judging or condemning someone. “He’s a controlling perfectionist,” “she’s a *primadonna*,” “the homeless are lazy,” “immigrants are criminals.” Judgement and condemnation assert strength and distance me from the other, but they really come from fear.

4

A good many years ago, I was working at Santa Clara University. Occasionally Jesuits in the community there would get a general email message from the Director of Campus Ministry to the effect that there is a wedding scheduled for the university chapel—the Mission Church we called it—and the couple does not have a priest to witness their marriage. Could anyone help them out?

Always risky. There are reasons why someone doesn't know a single Jesuit after four years in a Jesuit university.

In the first wedding, as we were about to begin the big procession, I noticed that all the groomsmen were intoxicated. Luckily the groom was sober or the marriage would have been invalid. In the second wedding, the bride told me at our first meeting that her father was estranged from the family and wouldn't be coming to the wedding. Then at the wedding rehearsal, the night before, she told me that he would after all be attending the wedding, but that he usually carried a gun. Nevertheless, I volunteered for another wedding: Finally, a nice couple, but they didn't go to Church, or not much, maybe Christmas. So why get married in the Church? I asked. They

5

admitted that it was because the Mission Church was so beautiful. Tell me about Church and God, I said, what do you think religion is all about?

“Church is to make people behave so God won’t condemn them.”

I almost screamed, but I’m guessing *that answer* is not uncommon.

In today’s gospel Jesus tells us very forcefully, “Don’t judge; don’t condemn; forgive.” This says a lot about how we should treat one another. But it also says much about God, and who God is. There is no where Jesus asks us to go where He has not already gone before us. Could He have asked us to carry a cross if He had not already done so Himself? No. Never. So when he tells us to forgive, don’t judge, don’t condemn—it must mean that what He asks of us is already true of God: God forgives; God does not condemn; God does not judge.

Back to the couple... Instead of screaming, I asked, “How would you like to go to a place where you are never condemned,

6

never judged, where someone acknowledges how the world or life has bruised or injured you, and where you are told that you are loved.’ “That sounds like a nice place, they said.”

I have a new idea for what our greeters and ushers might do! How would it be if a greeter said to each person as she or he enters the door of the church:

Here you will not be condemned

Here you will not be judged

I am sorry for how life has been hard on you, hurt you

I love you.

I can see the greeters getting nervous about that last one. Maybe “thank you for coming to church” would be enough.

*Gifts will be given you--
a good measure, packed together, shaken down and overflowing
will be poured into your lap.*