

From the Pastor

I served two churches in Indiana. Two at the same time. Two for the price of one. One of them, a Disciples of Christ church, was in town and the larger of the two. The other church, a UCC congregation, was at the end of a gravel road, on the edge of a cornfield. It was much smaller. Every Sunday morning, I would first drive to the end of that gravel road to preach and then back into town to preach again.

It was at the smaller of the two that I learned that a pastor has, in his or her pocket, three powerful words to use when needed. Three very powerful words.

I had just started as the pastor of that small church. It was only a few months into my tenure there that I was asked why I had not made a call on the husband of one of the church's members. He wasn't, himself, a member, but his wife was and she was the church's pianist. "Why haven't you made a call on him? He has cancer, you know." And I didn't know. I said, "I didn't know that." "But we told you," was the response. And I couldn't remember. It isn't like me to forget something like that. I honestly couldn't remember . . . But it was possible, possible that I forgot. I'm not God. I guessed it was maybe possible, but . . .

I decided on a course of action. The next Sunday morning, I drove out to the end of that gravel road. Before worship started, I stood before the people of that small congregation, and spoke those three powerful words. I said, "I am sorry." I apologized. I apologized and, of course, made amends as soon as I could.

Those three words made all the difference. I look back and think maybe my willingness to apologize—to humble myself by apologizing—demonstrated that I did really care about the people of that church and that I really did care about the relationship between them and me. Maybe that's the reason why. Maybe that's the reason why they forgave me. And they really did, much to my relief. They forgave me. After that day, my relationship with the people of that church was strong. My pastoral relationship with the people of that church was, perhaps, stronger than the relationship I have had with the people of any other church I have served.

I forgive you. Three more very powerful words.

And maybe you were thinking that those three powerful words, words that a pastor has in his or her pocket, were "God loves you." Those words are powerful. God does love you. God forgives you. Now, it isn't that God just "lets go". All too often we think of forgiveness as a kind of letting go, letting the past go, letting go of the hurt others have caused. As important as it may be for a person's mental health to let go, forgiveness is something else besides. The people of that little church, with their forgiveness, restored their relationship with me. They didn't just let go. God doesn't let go, either. God grabs ahold of us and works to restore the relationship we have with God. God doesn't let go of us. And God forgives us even before our mouths can form the words, I am sorry.

Pastor Neal