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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday in Lent (Series C)

February 28, 2016

Text: Luke 13:1–9

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It seems to me that one of the hardest things to teach Christians is the constant need of repentance. Not the world's repentance, or someone else's repentance...but their own. It seems to me that the hardest thing for me to teach myself is that I need to repent of my sins of thought, word, and deed, for what I done and what I left undone. It's all too easy to point the finger at all those nasty, godless, pagans out there in our world. They are the problems. If they'd repent, the world would be a much better place. But all three readings for today's service – Ezekiel 33, I Corinthians 10, and Luke 13 teach repentance should be taking place within the household of faith, either OT Israel and the NT Church. Repentance is, first and foremost, for us baptized believers in Christ.

Repentance is that constant state of mind and spirit that turns away from sin and runs headlong in God's mercy and grace. Christians need to repent. You and I need to repent, turn away from our sins and run pell-mell into the loving grace and mercy of Jesus. In many ways, what I have just described represents the heart and core of the Christian Scriptures.

Matthew's gospel records the first preached words from the mouth of John the Baptist, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 3:1). You remember John from our Advent season just a couple of months ago. He's the last prophet of the OT and the forerunner of the promised Messiah. His divine call was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. He does so by preaching repentance and administering a baptism of repentance.

This is the same John that called the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt. 3:7–10).

John, here, speaks of evil cloaked in garments of religious actions, of thinking that God owes you something because of your family lineage, of a forthcoming day of divine wrath against sin. And that time is close at hand and the only way to avoid the axe being laid to the root of the tree is to repentant.

Now we might be tempted to say. I'm sure glad we're not living in those OT times. Since the coming of Jesus, it's all about mercy and forgiveness and love. We don't have to worry about all that repentance and judgment stuff anymore. Repent of such thinking!

Matthew's gospel records the first spoken words of our Lord after His temptation in the wilderness. Can you guess what they are? Matthew 4:17, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Mark's gospel does the same thing. Jesus picks up with John's preaching of repentance and doesn't soften it one bit. Jesus drives the moneychangers out of the Temple in Jerusalem because they had turned the Temple from a house of prayer into a den of thieves. Our Lord described the Pharisees as white-washed tombs; nice-looking on the outside, life-less on the inside. He called them and all sinners to repentance and faith. The kingdom of God is at hand. Want to go to heaven, then repent and believe the gospel. Not interested in turning from your sins of thought, word, and deed? Then Christ and His heaven aren't for you. That's how absolutely vital and completely necessary repentance is.

In today's gospel reading, some came to Jesus and told him about a religious and political atrocity. We don't know why they came to Jesus with this information but it's safe to assume that they didn't anticipate our Lord's response. Recently, Pontius Pilate had killed some Galileans – northern Jews – as they were offering their sacrifices in Jerusalem's Temple! Some of their human blood got all mixed-in with the blood of the animals that were being sacrificed on the altar. It was a gross sacrilege and an insult to the Jewish people.

Galileans, those northern Jews, were known for being revolutionary zealots who hated the Roman occupation of Israel; they (i.e., the Galileans) were a rowdy bunch stirring up revolutionary fervor coupled with occasional violent activity. Pilate was probably trying to make a political point in his actions against the Galileans. Don't cause trouble or this is what happens. We will find you. Rebels and insurrectionist cannot find safety anywhere, not even while worshipping in your holiest place – the Temple. We will get you. And you will pay.

What do you make of that Jesus? Can you bring any sense out of this? Our Lord responds with a probing question, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?” (vs. 2) From this I take it that the questioners must have thought there must some correspondence, some cause and effect relationship, between evil deeds and suffering evil consequences. Those Galileans must have been really evil in order to suffer that kind of death. Big sins get a big judgment. Little sins get a little judgment. Or, big righteousness actions result in big rewards. It’s nice and logical, almost mathematical.

But it’s wrong. The Bible does not teach such a formulaic relationship with bad things and sin or good things and righteousness. Listen to Jesus in vs. 3, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” The proper response to such evil is recognizing your own sin, turning from it with heart, mind, and soul, and return to the Lord God in faith, trusting in His love and grace to forgive, heal, and renew. Regardless of the situation, recognize your own sin and receive God’s forgiveness lest you perish in unbelief and divine judgment.

Jesus presses this point even further with His own illustration. Notice that in vs. 4. The Lord Himself provides an even more challenging example. “Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloan fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offender than all others who lived in Jerusalem?” With the Galileans, some could argue that at least there was some kind of connection between them and the revolutionary fervor of their countrymen. But in this case, the 18 were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some would say just dumb, bad luck. Others might say there was something evil about those 18 which was hidden. But they got what they deserved. Wrong, wrong again.

Jesus refused to give explanatory reasons for why bad things happen to people. That kind of knowledge and information belongs to God and God alone. Our response to all forms of tragedy is the same: repentance, recognizing our own sin, turning from it, and receiving the love and forgiveness promised in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The only divinely revealed answer to the problem of evil is the death and resurrection of God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the end of all speculation. All evil, whether we are active or passive or non-participants, is answerable on that first Good Friday in which the Son of God died for all evil of all times and all places. Jesus takes the atrocity of the slaughter of the Galilean Jews and the accidental deaths of the 18 at the tower of Siloam, and every

other evil, big or small, yours, mine, the person next to you, the person across town, the people in whatever country, you name it, and takes it to His cross. And He dies for it. He pays for it; He takes responsibility. God is answerable for all evil. On the third day after His death for the evil of the world, Jesus rises again from the grave. By so doing, He demonstrates that His Good Friday-answer for all evil was sufficient.

Instead of finger pointing – are they worse sinners than others or am I the worst sinner– we repent, turn from evil, and run to Jesus. He takes care of it. He gives answer for your sins and evil. And His answer is, “Father, forgive them. I do not condemn them but I take all their sin away in my death. My blood covers them. My resurrection life is now their life. Bring them to an eternal inheritance in which evil is never again a possibility. Such is my love for them.”

In case you’ve missed the point, let me say it again. Jesus has given answer to all evil.

The question for us today is...will we repent and run to Jesus? That’s the purpose of the parable in vs. 6–9. Will the fig tree bring forth good fruit after being cared for and loved? Or must it be cut down? Will we repent or suffer God’s judgment on the Last Day?

Repentance is to be our way of life, dear saints of God. Nice, tidy cause and effect answers to evil must be abandoned. We recognize our own sins, turn from them, and run to the only divine answer given: Jesus died and rose again. He’s our refuge. Christ is the Savior, yours, mine, and the worlds. Run to the nail scarred, resurrected hands of Jesus. In them, find your life, hope, joy, and eternal peace.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.