



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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September 21, 2008
19th Sunday after Pentecost
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 25
Second Lesson: Philippians 2:1-11
Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32

Repent and Live!

God leads us to recognize our guilt
God leads us to rely on His grace

One of the results of living in a sinful world like you and I live in is that sickness and disease enters into it a lot. In our country, one of the big diseases that seem to come in one form or another is heart disease. Do you know anyone who has had a heart transplant? Have you known anyone that has had heart problems? What about you, have you had a heart transplant? I hope so because this morning, didn't our God say that we who are sinners get a new heart? Repent and live!

As we gather together we are reminded that God, through the work of His Spirit, has led us to believe that Jesus lived and died in our place and took away our sins and that God has given us this new heart so that not only do we repent and turn away from sin, but we turn away to the One who is the living God. We turn to Him and find in Him forgiveness. We do what is right, as He said. We believe God's promises.

In the 95 Theses of Luther, you probably remember how he nailed them to the door and all those kinds of things, but the first one of the 95 that he wrote, and that all the others followed up what he wanted to discuss, dealt with this matter of repentance. He wrote, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when he said 'repent,' willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance." So this morning, let's take a closer look at that word "repent" and think about what it means.

If you had to define it to someone, what would you say? Hopefully you wouldn't just say it means "to pent again," because that's not what "repent" means. It doesn't just mean "to be sorry for sins." That's "contrition," a part of repentance but not repentance alone. So this morning, let's see what it means to "repent and live." We'll see it as we look at the example that God had as He had Ezekiel deal with the children of Israel.

Ezekiel was a prophet shortly before the Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken away by the Babylonians. That happened in 586 B.C. About 10 years before that, the Babylonians had defeated the children of Israel, the Kingdom of Judah, in battle and had taken away a number of their leaders. Their leading men, their governors, the rich, and Ezekiel was one of those that were carried off into captivity before Jerusalem was destroyed. The people that were there in captivity in Babylon he ministered to, he warned them, and if you read his book, the first half of his book, the part which we are in, he tells the people, "Don't think God is going to spare Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be

destroyed because we have turned away from God.” So his message is “turn back to God and live.” Just like you hear in what we just read from Ezekiel.

In the second part of his book, he goes on as though the conquest of Jerusalem has already taken place and he speaks to those who will be now coming to join them in captivity and says, “God is still going to be your shepherd. You’ve had some false shepherds, but you are going to have faithful shepherds that will seek you out and restore you and bring you back. God himself will be your shepherd. He will come be your Messiah.” He says, “God will be the One who will do all these things for you. God will send His Spirit to give your dry bones, your lack of spiritual faith, make them alive again and give you the gift of faith.” That comes in the second half of the book.

But in the words that we are looking at today, you can hear the whole summary, in essence, of the first part of his book. “You guys are complaining. You guys are saying, ‘God’s not fair.’ You are quoting this proverb all the time.” Here is what God has Ezekiel say to them, “Why do you guys keep quoting me this proverb? The Father eats sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Think of what they are saying. “Our ancestors, our fathers, they sinned against you, God, and yet we are the ones who are suffering the punishment because we really haven’t done that much. We haven’t been that bad. The fathers eat sour grapes and our teeth are set on edge. Manasseh, he was a king that was wicked. We aren’t that bad though. They followed other gods. We don’t always do that. God, we’ve been pretty good. You’re just unfair. You are punishing us for things that we have not done.”

God tells them to think about it again. “Stop and check yourself and think about it again. Am I unjust, or is it really you who are unjust? Are you the one who is looking for excuses, looking for all kinds of other reasons for your actions rather than just saying, ‘We have sinned against God. It doesn’t matter if someone else has sinned more in our minds against God. We have sinned against God.’ They were unwilling to say that.

So in the middle part of this chapter which we didn’t read, God talks about a father, a son and a grandson and how the father does what is right but then the son does what is wicked and he will be punished for that. Then the grandson, even though he sees the son who was wicked and grows up in that atmosphere, he does what is right. He won’t be punished because his father was a sinner. It’s his relationship to God that determines his eternity. That’s what he is talking about in here when he talks about dying. He’s talking about eternal death. He’s not talking about physical death or physical consequences of our sins. He is talking about eternity.

That really is how we get at times, isn’t it? Even when we say to ourselves, “we are repenting of our sins,” we are a lot like these Israelites. We want to find someone else that we think is worse than we are and say, “Yeah, but,” right? Did you ever do that as a child? Mom or Dad ever look you in the eyes and say, “Did you hit your sister?” Did you say, “Yeah, but she hit me first.” So what are you saying? “It’s not my fault. What would you expect me to do? I couldn’t help myself. I really did what was right. I was hit first so I had to hit back.” We are pretty good at making excuses for our sins, right? We

are really saying then, “Mom, Dad, you should really be punishing them more than me because it’s their fault more than mine.” Instead of just saying, “Yes. I did. I was wrong.”

We get a little older here and we are pleading with Mom and Dad as a teenager. Did you ever resort to “But everyone else is going to be there. Everyone else is doing it. Everyone else...yada, yada, yada.” It means it’s okay if everyone else is doing it right? That’s what we seem to convince ourselves of. We don’t say it’s wrong or it’s right. We say everyone else is doing it, so it must be okay. That’s not what God asked us to do. He asked us to compare ourselves to His standard of absolute right and wrong. If everyone else is doing it, the soul that sins is the one who will die. Every soul is accountable to God. He kind of made that pretty clear when He spoke pretty clearly here. It doesn’t matter what everyone else is doing. God asked us to compare ourselves to Him, not to everyone else.

We eventually grow out of that, don’t we? As adults, when we go to fill out our taxes, we would never, ever say, “Oh, the government is so unfaithful with how they handle their money. If I cheat on my taxes, it’s not a big deal.” That’s kind of the government hit me first kind of thing that we said as a kid. Or then we convince ourselves, “Everyone else cheats on their taxes. I might as well cheat on my taxes.” And we convince ourselves that we don’t need to repent and live because instead of looking at God’s clear mirror of His Law and comparing ourselves to it, we still are that little child that’s holding his breath and saying, “She started it.”

This is what we are. Repentance before God involves sorrow over sins. And that sorrow comes when you compare yourself to what God has said. God has absolute standards of right and wrong. He says, “I don’t care why you did it. If you did what is wrong, it is sin. And even when you do what is right, if you do it for the wrong reason, it is sin.” You say, “I tell the truth, but I’m doing it to hurt my neighbor.” He says, “Speak the truth in love.” If you aren’t speaking the truth in love, you have sinned. Don’t hide behind, “Well, it’s true.” If you’re not doing it to build that person up, you are doing it to hurt them. And if you aren’t saying it to them, you are gossiping. It is sin.

“Repent and live,” God says. Look at what God says. “The soul who sins is the one who will die.” He says that so that we will be terrorized by His Law and turn away from our sins. That’s one part of repentance—terror over our sin and what it deserves and turning away from that sin.

But repentance also involves turning to the Lord, to His mercy. He says in here, “If a wicked man turns away from his wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life.” God has told us what is just and right when we have sinned—to admit our sin and then to throw it at the cross, to trust that Christ lived and died in our place to take those sins away, and He didn’t make the excuses that you and I make. He carried our excuses to the cross. Then, because He has loved us with this kind of love, we want to just get rid of all the “commas” in our life of repentance. Repentance involves “periods,” not “commas.”

When we see our sin from God's Law, say, "I have sinned against you Lord by doing this. My words hurt my friend. Lord, I have sinned. For the sake of Christ, forgive me. I have hurt my neighbor by my words (period). For the sake of Jesus, forgive me (period)." You and I are more inclined to say, "Lord, I know my words hurt that person (comma), but they really irritated me. They had it coming. They should have known better." We put comma after comma and dependent clause after dependent clause trying to excuse and rationalize our sin. A life of repentance is the life of periods. "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." No excuses. No rationalizations. No comparisons to anyone except God. And if you honestly compare yourself to God, you've got no excuse.

Repentance is also believing that God speaks in "periods," not in "commas." God says, "for the sake of Jesus, your sins are forgiven (period)." Not, "If you do this or if you do that." God does not make His forgiveness conditional, which is really a good thing because you and I wouldn't meet those conditions. We can't. So He says to us clearly, boldly, the God died for our sins—not only for our sins, but the sins of the whole world. God is faithful and just and will forgive us all our sins and iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. By His wounds, we are healed. Over and over He illustrates this truth for us so that we can turn to His grace and not ourselves and not look in any other direction except His grace. Then we grow in our faith. Then we stop doing all the silly, stupid things we do because we are sinners. We stop thinking that we know every last thing there is to know about service in God's kingdom and we humbly submit to His Word and say, "Lord, help me grow so I serve you better." We stop sitting back as spectators and viewing what others are doing in the kingdom and critiquing it and running it down and saying "they" and "them" about our congregation instead of "we" and "us."

When we see our own sin and we see that God has forgiven us, it changes us. It gives us that new heart that says we have a greater purpose in life than to sit around and moan about what others are doing. God has given us talent so that we can get up off our duff and get involved and serve with the gifts that He has given us and find joy and peace in sharing with others the message of God's reconciliation in Christ instead of critiquing those who do it.

God has given us a new heart. It beats to the drumbeat of Word and Sacrament. The more we are in Word and Sacrament, the more we see how we have been rescued by the Son, the more we will serve our God with a life of repentance.