

Ash Wednesday C

Luke 18:9-14

March 1, 2017

Nearly 500 years ago, the world was turned upside down. A friar by the name of Martin Luther penned 95 theses and posted them in order to debate them with theologians. One of the main themes of the theses was what repentance is. You see that in the very first thesis which reads: When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent!” he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Almost 500 years later, repentance is also on our minds this Ash Wednesday as another penitential season of Lent begins. Repentance is also on Jesus’ mind. Tonight the Savior reveals key truths about repentance in the gospel. As we listen to the prayers of two men, we come to a deeper understanding of what it means to repent that we, too, have entire lives of repentance. These words of St. Luke’s gospel bless you with a repentant heart tonight, a heart that **Turns to Jesus and not to Yourself.**

Picture the parable...See a lamb burning on the altar as the sun is sinking low in the sky. Smell the incense wafting in the breeze. As you squeeze your way through the mass of people in the temple courts, you see a single man, one who spends ample time in the temple. You see how well dressed he is in his flowing robes...he’s one of the religious elite from head to toe. He stands up so he can be clearly heard and seen. And then you notice another man. He’s in the corner. All alone. He’s in rough shape. Should he even be here you wonder to yourself because you recognize him as a tax collector...a cheat.

And then you hear their prayers. The Pharisee prays: *‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’* And then, from the one in the distance, the one who won’t even look up to heaven but beats his breast, you hear ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

The Pharisee certainly had plenty to pray about. But did you notice what his favorite word was? Not help. Not heal. Not mercy. Not forgive. Not Lord. But an ugly and all-consuming word...I. He has his own little thanksgiving day in the temple. In fact, he is everything he thinks God wants. How lucky he thinks God is that he is on God’s side. He wasn’t a robber. He wasn’t a glutton. He was a big giver. He was a disciplined faster. He was like one of those sinful people. He was a spiritual cut above the rest. He felt he had no need to turn to God in repentance when he can turn to himself and his own holy pedigree.

And then there is the other man in the parable. Not a Pharisee but a publican...a tax collector. Not a man full of himself but completely empty. Not a man praying to be praised but praying to be forgiven. Not a man bragging but repenting. A man turning not toward himself but toward God.

With his head not held up toward heaven but looking down in shame he prayed. With his hands not outstretched but clenched into fists that beat his chest in grief he prayed. And what was his prayer? “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” “God be appeased.” He knew there was nothing he could do to turn God’s wrath over his sin away from him. Praying right, paying right, fasting right and washing right would never cut it and remove God’s punishment. He wasn’t the solution. He couldn’t turn toward himself. He needed to be turned to another. God himself must appease his wrath and turn his punishment away from the tax collector and to another.

So as you hear these two prayers this Ash Wednesday, in your heart of hearts, with whom do you identify? Really think about it. Sure, you may not fast twice a week, but you didn’t gorge yourself on Fat Tuesday. Perhaps you don’t give a tenth of all you get but you have your envelope with you tonight. You know you’re saved by grace alone but at the same time, God also knows you’re trying your best. What more could he ask for, right? And if we are quick and confident in identifying with the tax collector without acknowledging our sins of pride and self-reliance, recognize that for the sin that it is as well.

Tonight, trade your soft, comfortable security of self for the sackcloth and ashes of repentance. Turning to ourselves is both sinful and nonsensical. God doesn't compare what you do with what other people do. God doesn't measure you by whether or not you fill a part of a pew on Ash Wednesday. He doesn't look more favorably on you because you didn't rub shoulders with the drunks on Bourbon Street last night. God doesn't judge you by comparing you to others so you shouldn't either. He judges by his own holiness. He measures your heart and your thoughts, how you act and how you speak against his perfection and in doing so he rips away our security blanket of self and self-reliance. **Turn not to yourself.**

Turn not to yourself but to Jesus. Jesus closed the parable with these words, ***For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.***"

The Pharisee exalted himself. He thought he was God's right-hand man. He thought he was better than the sinners. He thanked God he wasn't a robber, evildoer and adulterer. He considered himself faithful. He considered himself holy and righteous. And through it all, he lied. He lied to himself and he lied to God. In turning toward himself, he was turning away from God and toward the hell he deserved and has suffered and in which he has been eternally humbled.

That tax collector humbled himself. He turned away from any thought that he was holy. He knew his sin. And he was forgiven. In turning away from self and toward Jesus he was forgiven and exalted. How? By Jesus' own role reversal. The Lord of heaven became the criminal on the cross. The God who fills the universe filled a tomb. The Lord of glory became the Suffering Servant so that the Father's wrath against sin could be appeased. Appeased, not by ignoring sin, but by punishing our sin in his Son. Jesus became the Chief of sinners upon the cross so that you and I—chiefs of sinners—could become sons and daughters. Listen and be amazed at Jesus' role reversal. Our Lord is the ultimate example of the humble being exalted.

Underneath Rome there are caves called catacombs that go on for miles. You are probably aware that ancient Christians secretly worshiped in these catacombs during periods of persecution. Rome also contains what is likely the most ancient depiction of Jesus' crucifixion—in the form of some anti-Christian graffiti. Scratched into the plaster wall is the picture of a man kneeling before a cross with his arms raised in worship. Hanging on the cross is the figure of a man—with a donkey's head. Scratched underneath that picture are the words "Alexamenos Worships His God." The point? Alexamenos is a fool to worship a man who was crucified! But humble Alexamenos is now in heaven. The One pictured with the head of a donkey by a Roman heathen now sits on a throne. Alexamenos' God, the tax collector's God, YOUR God, has been appeased by the death of his Son in our place. So with repentant hearts, turn to him who sacrificed himself for you! With grateful hearts, receive his mercy anew every morning. With expectant hearts, look forward to Easter victory!

Jesus taught, and Luther believed, that a Christian's entire life is a life of repentance—a lifelong turning away from ourselves and our works and a turning toward Christ and his work. It is not in the goodness of your works; the earnestness of your prayers; the zeal that you have for the Lord's work; or the love and commitment that you have for your family, your church, or your country that saves you—not in the least.

The humble cross of Christ saves you! Like the tax collector in the corner, the cross doesn't look like much. But look closer, because in the cross you find the Almighty appeased, a Father's forgiveness, your God's goodness, your Lord's love, and your repentant prayers answered! Because of Jesus' work, you go home justified.

Turn to him. And only him. Always him. Amen.