

Sermon on Luke 13:1-9 and 31-35
Pastor Douglas Larson

Second Sunday in Lent March 12, 2017
At First Lutheran Church, Aitkin

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Success, health and wealth means God loves you and is happy with you, right? Bad times, troubles, tragedy is God's punishment on you, right? Pontius Pilate killed some Jews from Galilee and mingled their blood with the sacrifices they had brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. God's punishment, right? And the 18 men who died when the Tower of Siloam crashed, God's punishment upon them, right?

No, says Jesus, these people were not greater sinners than you. God was not singling them out because they were greater sinners. In fact, says Jesus, You, unless you repent, will perish like them. You will come to nothing! Those are Jesus' words to us today, tough to hear. Repent or perish.

But repenting is hard for some people. Some say, I don't sin. One person I read about in the last 10-15 years said, "I haven't sinned in seven years." Others see themselves as the center of the universe, whatever they do is right. They do nothing wrong. A sociopath, or psychopath will also say they don't sin—or care if what they do is sin. If simply doesn't matter to them.

In Greek mythology there is a person called Narcissus, who fell in love with his reflection in a pool. He spent all his time looking at himself. Narcissus is the name given to people who have an excessive degree of self-esteem or self-involvement. Life is all about them and there is an emotional immaturity to them. There is a fixation with oneself and ones physical appearance and /or public perception of them. They have to always be right.

There is a joke about a narcissus type person, after spending many minutes talking about themselves to another person, he or she stops and says, "All right, that's enough about me, let's talk about you, so what do you think of me?"

Repenting is hard for us and especially hard for these kinds of people. In the back of the New Testament there are three letters of a man named John. He is writing to people who didn't see themselves as sinners or sinful. They believed the problem was that the world was wrapped in layers of ignorance. They saw Jesus as a savior who came to break through these layers of ignorance and open the true wisdom to us. Sin was not a problem.

John writes to these people and a portion of this letter was part of the Confession of Sin in the green Lutheran Book of Worship. You have heard it and can probably say it along with me. From 1 John 1:8-10, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Remember it? Of course!

We as Lutheran Christians, believe that we are born with a disease called sin. We call it original sin, because it has been passed down through the ages along with our other genetic traits. It is similar to narcissism. Martin Luther said it manifested itself in the sinful self. I describe the sinful self as “me, myself and I”. It makes us believe we are the center of the world. It is all about me.

We see this sinful self, this “me, myself and I” in the “terrible twos”. “No, I don’t want to.” “No, I want what I want.” It is No just because you want to say it and have your way. Now most children pass through this stage and learn that life has to be a balance of what we want and what other people want and to learn to often put our selfish wants behind us.

Today, Jesus comes to us to remind us to repent, to turn around from those sinful ways we are going. We hear this in our text today, but we hear it in other ways too.

During the month of February, my wife and I had the opportunity to be on the Pacific Ocean for three weeks. The ship was a British ship and therefore, it was the responsibility of the Captain of the ship, to lead a worship service every Sunday. The order of service was called the Traditional Maritime Sunday Service, based on the Church of England worship.

As I sat in the service, I found myself looking back at the confession of sin a number of times. I was caught by the words, “...we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders. Spare thou them, O Lord God which confess their faults. Restore thou them that are penitent...”

As I read them over and over, I strangely felt comforted, reassured. It felt good to hear and say those words—that I was a sinner, a miserable offender and it felt good to say that, to get it out of my heart. Even though those words were not very nice to me, I felt a relief saying them, way out in the midst of the Pacific Ocean. A comfort to say them.

To say those words means that I’m not perfect. It means I don’t do a very good job of being good. And that’s the truth, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” I’m certainly not perfect and not always very good at being good.

Jesus comes to us today in our Gospel and in the words of that ship’s worship service and every Sunday in our Lutheran liturgy to say, “Unless you repent—admit your sinful nature and your sins as a result, you will perish.” Uffda! To perish means to come to nothing, to come to nothingness. To have lost everything.

I’m not sure Hell is so much a place of fire and torture as it is a place where there is the complete absence of hope. I imagine Hell to be like a 4-5-or 6 year old child, who has become lost in a huge department store, and day after day searches for their parents, but

never finds them. The complete loss of hope, to have perished, to have come to nothing. A separation from God forever.

Jesus doesn't want this for us, or for anyone. So the words, "I confess my sins, I am not perfect, I am not good enough on my own," are wonderful words. I appreciated them in the service on those Sundays. They are words that are squeezed out of us by the work of the Holy Spirit, "This is me!"

Then as we say them, we also hear the words of Jesus, "Receive the gracious and merciful forgiveness of all your sins in my name." We may hear Jesus' words to Nicodemus, in John 3:17, "For God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

I think of those I mentioned earlier in the sermon, who have a hard time repenting, or who don't want to repent. Perhaps they believe that if they confess their sin, their imperfection, that they are not perfect, God will abandon them: that they will be worse off than in their deception of who they are. And that is very hard to handle.

Some churches do that; Lutherans don't. Lutherans have a good understanding of Jesus: who says you all need to repent, to confess that you have done wrong in many ways, that you have been going the wrong way, to turn around –that's what repent really means, to turn around from going the wrong way-- and receive the forgiveness of all your sins, so you do not perish, but have life and life abundantly in God's love through Jesus.

We are in the Lenten season. It is a special time to concentrate on who we are—sinners, whom Jesus wants to forgive. Let us make a point of letting Jesus do that, everyday. Amen.