

The Necessity of Repentance

Brothers and sisters, friends in Christ,

How is your walkway? Is it shoveled? Is there a clear pathway? And beneath all that snow, are there any tripping hazards? Are there rocks that one stubs their toe on or dips that could throw out a leg? Or have roots grown underneath it and forced it all to come up a little? The place where Becky and I rent is pretty new, so the concrete hasn't even cracked yet, but the lawn around the side of our house tells a different story. Right where the rain gutter drains out, there's a spot where the ground was not compacted well, and therefore rain has washed away a lot of the dirt under the sod, and it dips. It dips hard. And I've really come to watch for it with all the snow on the ground because you cannot see it, but you feel it. My whole body reacts as it tries to figure out why I'm still dropping and why my knee is jamming against solid ground a few seconds later than I anticipated. Sounds dramatic, I know, but I'm trying not to let it happen...a third time.

John would have something to say to the contractors who laid the soil and sod around our place. Raise up the valley so that everyone can walk a straight path *without* having to watch their feet.

John's voice resonated amidst the people of God after centuries of silence. There had been turmoil and peace—but more often than not turmoil. The people had cried out to God and the Pharisees were teaching people to live right so that the Messiah would finally come. There was a sense that God would come and save His people from the pagan rule over them, just as He had in generations past. They were waiting.

And out of the wilderness comes the voice of John saying “Get ready! Here He comes!” He proclaimed that they ought to repent because the saviour was coming and He'd bring

judgment. And being a descendent of Abraham wasn't necessarily the safety net that they had all hoped for. Not even the self-righteous Pharisees were safe. Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and then bear fruit in keeping with repentance. You heard the text. And not for the first time, either.

But when we hear this text, we've got to realize that we live in an entirely different context. We live on the other side of the divide, as marked by the life and death and resurrection of Christ. You and I have been baptized, not with the baptism of John the Baptist which pointed towards Christ and His baptism, but with that very baptism, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. There, you and I hold onto the forgiveness won by the Messiah who John was just awaiting, and so 100% of you has been redeemed, marked as saint, been leveled by God's law and have seen the salvation of your God. To this, John has nothing to say because there is nothing for you to repent of. You, my brothers and sisters, are holy.

But to the other 100% of you, the sinner, John still brings a stark warning. This part of you is met by John in the wilderness, wandering outside the promised land where we grumble against God and His laws and everything He's put us through. This very real part of us must hear John's warnings as serious because the next time Christ comes, He comes again for judgment. The first time judgment fell on Christ in our place. The next time, it will fall on the sinner.

This is the side of us that doesn't take sin very seriously. It might "regret" that it happened—it certainly doesn't like being caught. One side of us clings to Christ because it is only in Him that we find grace but the sinner part of us sees the forgiveness we have in Christ and sits back to relax because it means it doesn't have to worry much about what has happened. The sinner in us ignores the consequences, the real consequences, that occur because of our sins—because of our jealousy and anger, our laziness and gossip and our lust—we ignore these

because the sin is dealt with, right? We've been forgiven. This *is* true. Our forgiveness doesn't depend on how right we act afterwards or how much we hate the sin that we were just forgiven for—our forgiveness depends on the sacrifice of Christ alone, that it was for me, for you.

But in reality, repentance is not simply an act of confession, but it's a physical turning motion—away from one thing and towards another. In the case of confession, this means turning away from our sin and turning towards God, and if we have genuinely turned towards God it means that we won't desire to continue to act in that sin. If we are walking towards and with God we won't want what others have, we won't get angry and hate our neighbours, we won't get frustrated with our aging parents.

So when we repent, we must ask, just as the crowds asked John, what must we do instead? If I'm not going to speak poorly about my spouse, what else should I do? If I'm not going to cheat on my hour sheet at work, what else should I do? If I'm turning from getting mad at customers at work, what else should I be doing? To be contrite and to confess is to dislike the direction we were going down and seek to go the right way—towards God. If this is not the “next step” we must ask what's really going on.

And typically, if we aren't seeking to correct our sinful life after confessing it to God, it's because, while we might recognize that God doesn't like it, we don't see that it really makes a difference—it's not like we murdered anyone. He'll forgive us and we can repeat the cycle. But this is a pretty shallow view of the grace that we're receiving. The reality of what is going on is much deeper than we realize and recognize. Where we see a slight blemish as being washed away, God has put onto His Son, as He writhed in agony on the cross, the damnation of that sin as well as the horrible consequences we are causing for others. Christ endured both the payment for our hatred as well as the pain and sorrow those who receive our hatred feel. The result of *this*

is what you and I receive every time we hear the absolution and partake in Holy Communion and hear His Word proclaimed to our ears.

It is this good news, that our debt has been paid and His Spirit has been given to us that ought to draw us towards Him, turning 180 from our sins. This is the fruit of repentance John spoke of. For the soldiers, they aren't to extort by violence—or at all. For the tax collector, they aren't to take more than their fair share. And for every other citizen, they are to give of the abundance that they've received from God.

This last one probably resonates closest with us, who receive more than we could ever enjoy in one lifetime. But because we're sinners day by day, there are nearly infinite other routes of repentance that we're called to take. The parent who becomes unreasonably mad at the children ought to demonstrate love and proper discipline. The children who act out against parents ought to ooze respect and love and service. Those having sex before marriage are called to stop and wait and then enjoy after the vows are spoken. The worker ought to put in 100% of their effort as they put in a full day and the boss ought to treat workers with respect and pay a fair wage. The farmer and business owner, the carpenter and mechanic, each ought to live out each day with integrity, abiding by the laws of the land and the Law of God. Do these because you have been forgiven. Live repentantly.

And yet, even on the best days, when we are determined to move parallel with the word of God, when we want to love our neighbours and serve strangers alike, we might realize that what we really want is to want to do these things. When the rubber meets the road we might love the idea of caring for the widows and fatherless, but the time and energy it takes is more demanding than we would ideally like to give. And even if our desires stay firm, we find that our thoughts of good intention are woven with thoughts of less holy intents. Even if we are able to

outwardly demonstrate excellent love and service for our children or our parents, our thoughts sigh and ask how much longer this might go on for today.

You and I, even on the best days, are double minded and the part of us that is committed flails about or fails despite our best intentions.

Our best attempts at the fruits of repentance often match our repentance, our confession itself. I hate the confession in Divine service setting 3. Not all of it. Not the thoughts of it nor the results of it. But there are a few words that make my spine straighten up and my brow crunch together. I “Sincerely” repent? I’m “heartily” sorry? Am I? I guess I hope I am, but I certainly hope that my forgiveness is not based on the fact that I’m not lying in my very confession, because if it is, then some Sundays I think I’m headed down the wrong path... There is a part of me, I know, that will always want to keep on sinning. If he’s silent during confession, that’s superb. But he’s not gone. And honestly, I think some days he shuts up during the confession because what *he* hears is a license being handed out to keep on sinning. And he loves that.

Thanks be to God that His absolution is not based on our confession—not on whether it is pure and honestly intended, not whether it’s a complete list of my sins nor whether I stick to my new direction 3 days down the road. His Word of forgiveness to you and me is based solely on Christ and His perfect atonement on your behalf.

So we’re invited, as ones who have been promised that grace exists, to confess even our impure and incomplete desire for His forgiveness and righteousness. And just like that, for Jesus’ sake, He receives us. He already had, but our confession recognizes our need for Him. He makes us new, clean, whole, and holy. Here, in His grace, not in our efforts, He changes us.

By the renewed promise of His grace, as we understand just how much has been done for our sake, just how much has been freely gifted to us, here He changes our desire, that we may yearn to live like Him and cease abusing His forgiveness.

And here as well are we given the power that actually changes us—not just our desires but our lives—our moments with friends and family and strangers alike. Here we are made new, even today. Even next time when the changes from this moment are not complete, not permanent, or not evident at all. Here He works on us again and again, and it is His pleasure to keep up His glorious work of bringing salvation to leveled ground.

Perhaps this happens clearest in Holy Communion, where Jesus delights in bringing to you and to me the wonderful gifts He has won on the cross, His very flesh and blood. And coming to the table, you and I are leveled. Our pride is brought low because we bring Him nothing and yet we receive everything. And you and I are also raised up—we are welcomed despite the sin and shame we bear, despite how others have torn you down and trampled over you. We come, repentant and leveled down, kneeling to receive the salvation of our God in the meal which He loves to give.

And another place where we may be leveled by John's word of Law, one where we are all too resistant to venture, is private confession and absolution. There, in the midst of conversation about where you have fallen short and caused pain, the results of sin are made remarkably clear. Sin is not simply something to be brushed away, like it can feel like in public confession. As the words exit your mouth you realize how much you wish you could take those words, those actions, those moments back—and yet you can't. But despite what has gone before, Christ forgives you. Not conditionally. Not begrudgingly. He, out of His love and joy, chose to

die for even those sins, and now, in His forgiveness, you may continue onto the next day, living in Him.

Here, in Christ's church, we are leveled by the Law of God, and especially in this time of Advent we see the need of our saviour to come and bring salvation to us who have been hills and valleys.

And come He does. In the manger to bring salvation to the world by His Holy Passion on the cross. In His Word He comes to sustain us in our journey through these your lives, and someday, He will come to bring salvation into our sight, and take us into it's very presence, into His presence forever.

Amen, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.