

Sermon March 12, 2017 – Lent 2

Based on the Reconciliation series put on by the ABC District

Repentance Means Leaving Our Idols Behind

Genesis 12:1



Dear Friends in Christ

Grace and Peace from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Last week in our sermon we heard about the need to repent. It is needed because of sin.

As fallen sinful people we all blow it, we mess things up. That's why every relationship we have needs to be based on repentance and forgiveness.

Think of marriage for example. For a good relationship between husbands and wives dependence on one partner admitting that they made a mistake and asking for forgiveness and then the other partner granting that forgiveness is crucial.

It's no different with our relationship with God.

As fallen, sinful people, we break God's law every day in our thinking, in our speech and in what we do or don't do as we are supposed to. We do break God's law, we do ruin our relationship with Him therefore, as in our marriage relationships we need to ask God for forgiveness, the forgiveness that he has offered us on the account of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for those sins.

In the Garden of Eden there was only one law that God gave our first parents, but as time went on, God gave an expanded set of laws to His people. He did this so that we are clear on what sin is, and what we need to repent of. The first commandment that God gave to Moses is the hardest one for us to keep, "You shall have no other gods before Me."

Now, before we continue meditation on this commandment, I would like to explain something that we need to understand when we hear or read a sermon, a devotional, or even when we read the Scriptures, that is God's message is always a two-fold message. That is Law and Gospel. The Law is everything God requires of us to do. And the Gospel is everything God does for us through Jesus Christ. Both are to go hand in hand. Because the law, what the law does, it exposes our reality, the law condemns us, for we do brake them constantly. And if all we hear is the law then we are in trouble. We will leave, we will remain with our guilt and shame before God. The law although good never uplifts us, instead drags us down. But the Gospel, the Gospel on the other hand brings about God's forgiveness, it is uplifting, actually is life giving. The life that God brings about through Christ! Focus on that, look for it and receive it. Don't just hear the law, but look for the Gospel.

Here is the law today. The Law says "You shall have no other gods before Me." This commandment protects us from idolatry, which is in fact what in our Old Testament lessons is happening.

In the text God informs Abram of His plan to bless him and make him a blessing, but for that there are conditions. Abram must leave his country, his father's house and he must follow God's direction, even though he didn't know where he was going. Now,

one thing we must know is that Abraham until now was an idol worshipper. How do we know this? Well, when Joshua gathered the tribes of Israel to Shechem after they had settled in the Promised land we read in Joshua 24:2, "And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods."

It is out of that idolatry that God called Abraham and promised him, land, people and the Saviour was coming through him.

Before leaving Abraham was surrounded by an ungodly system of idolatry and polytheism...the worship of many gods. But God called him out of that system to follow Him as the One true God, and worship him only.

That's what he desired not only for Abraham, but all through history and time even today. He calls those who would follow Him to renounce and dethrone all other rivals and look to Him alone as Lord of our life.

Even today? Yes even today! Now, you might say, "I don't worship any other god. I don't bow down to Baal or Krishna. I don't have any little statues in a shrine in my living room that I light candles for, and no, I don't worship any false gods."

That might be true. However, let me ask you this, what defines you to today? What is it that you like the best? What is it that you model your life after, or, I don't know, maybe even willing to die for? Fashion, perhaps, jobs, sports, your boat, your holiday trailer, the music you prefer, your favorite musical group, movies, how about your gadgets? What about culture, politics, your spouse, or your children, or your parents? What defines you? Now notice that some of these things are not bad and even necessarily, they are even given by God as his blessings. The problem is when you equate them to the same level of God, the same level of priority, even the same level of worship. That's when idolatry begins to take place.

Now, how is it that we equate those things to the same level of God, how is that possible? Think of this for a moment. People today perhaps more than ever try to fit God into a comfortable time slot around all their other activities where He doesn't inconvenience them. That's how!

And convenience is a god in itself that demands high prices in worship. Every year millions of unborn babies are slain on the altar of convenience. People worship the god of materialism, the god of popular opinion, the god of physical fitness or the god of recreation. Even in our Lutheran church we can make a god out of who we are, our church buildings, our heritage...

We can become proud of our theology and liturgies and this can cause us to become puffed up, preventing us from applying it to our lives. Like Nebuchadnezzar who designed and set up his own image to be worshipped as god, so multitudes of people in our churches do the same thing. They have designed a god after their own image and worship a god of their own creation while the altar of the One true God is left empty and alone. Their god never chastises or disciplines them; he never hurts their pride or requires humility and submission. They are like the Pharisees of whom Jesus said, "They honour Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me."

The problem is that that situation is hostile, in fact deadly, to our spiritual life. But God call us out of that hostile idolatrous environment, just as he did with Abraham. To his credit, Abraham believed God and obeyed him, did as he was told. But it wasn't easy!

Often Abraham is portrayed as a man of super faith and a great man of God, but the reality is that he had trouble being obedient, just like us. But God changed Abraham's heart through the Holy Spirit, working through His proclaimed Word, bringing him to repentance and faith, Just like He does with all of us today. And upon His forgiveness he begins to count all believers as righteous people, by grace, through faith. It is nothing we can earn. It is received by faith alone.

Now notice what happens with Abraham, in faith he obeys God's command. The Scriptures tell us that "He believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness."

The truth is, we are all idolaters at heart. What we love most is ourselves. Luther said that human beings are "turned in on themselves." We do not love the Lord our God with all our heart soul and mind. We do not love our neighbours as ourselves. Like us, and just as the Word of the Lord convicted Abraham of his sin of idolatry, he repented and received the Kingdom of Heaven by faith, so happens with us.

In faith Abraham did also something that we need to learn to do, in faith obediently followed the Lord, leaving his idols and former life behind. This is what true repentance looks like. Repentance is not simply sorrow over having done wrong, rather it changes things. Simply being sorry for doing wrong may even prove to be harmful because it can sanitize and appease our conscience without producing any real change.

Biblical repentance however says "I will strive not to do this again and I will look to the Lord for strength to help me." Repentance means turning away from one's sin. In Abraham's case, that meant leaving his old life behind and following the Lord. And we are called to do the same. We are called out of idolatry and self-love to follow the Lord according to His Word. It may not take us physically away from where we live, but we are called spiritually out of an attitude of worshipping many gods to worshipping the One True God and Him alone. Biblical repentance doesn't merely change things, but changes things for the right reason. Repentance changes things inside and out. Sin is the flight from all that is right and good. Unchecked and unrepentant sin has the power to drag believers away from true life and blind us to God's true blessings.

Lent is a season of repentance. It is the time to be honest with ourselves and examine our lives...to see our sins of idolatry for what they are. It means being honest with ourselves, turning away from our sins and not hide them...and we need to do this daily.

Now, here is the good news, here is the Gospel. There is forgiveness for our idolatry. Jesus died for all sins. He didn't die just because of the consequences of sin for us but because of the evil nature of it. He had to become one of us, live a perfect sinless life and then die as the perfect once for all sacrifice so that the consequences of our sin could be lifted from us through repentant faith in Him. But let's call it the way it is...He didn't die for us because death is depressing or even because eternal damnation is painful and unpleasant. No, he died because he had compassion on us sinners.

And so while we were yet in our sin, while we were still enemies of God, Christ died for us. This is how God demonstrated His immeasurable love for us, so that now, because of what Jesus has done for us we can have the confidence that, 'When we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

He poured out His Holy Spirit upon us so that we might love Him instead of our idols because they stand between us and God. He wants us to be lovers of God

instead of ourselves and our stuff, and that is why repentance changes things. It changes things in our relationship with God and it changes things in our relationships with each other as well. It changes the outward conduct and speech by changing the inner man and our motivations. Repentance receives the power of the Gospel, and the Gospel is for you, here today.

The law convicts of our sins, but thanks be to God that through the power of the Holy Spirit He brings us to repentance, to receive the life giving news of the Gospel, won for us on the cross of Calvary.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...amen.