

Sermon Notes for 2/10/16 (Ash Wednesday)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Joel 2:12-14

Theme: WHAT RETURNING TO THE LORD LOOKS LIKE

The Point: Repentance, returning to the Lord, is what the life of the believer looks like.

Introduction: Joel prophesied during a time when Israel was being overrun by natural disaster. Locusts and drought had attacked, and the results were as bad as having foreign armies march through. The people were devastated. Their crops were ruined; their homeland was barren and unrecognizable. Joel pictured this ruination of the land as a sign portraying the coming of the Day of the Lord, the final Day of Judgment. “The day of the Lord is coming, it is near – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!” But, remarkably, this doom and gloom leads to a blessed invitation: “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me.” This uniquely shattering experience, according to the prophet of the Lord, was to point people to the Lord’s desire to draw them back to Himself. God promises to use even the most disastrous and devastating experiences brought upon us by sin and Satan to draw us back to Himself and His gracious will for our lives.

Many of the Israelites had responded to their overwhelming difficulties in ways that pushed God away. You probably know how that can happen, don’t you? Some in Israel had no doubt simply denied God’s goodness because of their personal losses. They figured that any god who was good would not allow them to suffer as they were. Some had reverted to or transferred their allegiance to the gods of the nations around Israel, which they may have seen as having more power than Yahweh, since, as they believed, He had failed them. Their prayers had not prevented the tragic consequences that they were experiencing, so they thought they would try other gods and masters. Others had simply retreated into despair and hopelessness, giving no reference or attention to the Lord, who, it seemed, had abandoned them. Joel knew that any of these responses would have called for the same remedy, namely repentance. The dominant picture that Joel uses portrays repentance as “returning to the Lord.”

“Return to me,” says the Lord. What would such repentance look like in the lives of God’s people then, and what does it look like now? How does the Lord picture this returning? Well, for one thing, it is to be a whole-hearted response. “Return to me with all your heart.” Nothing half-hearted will suffice. There is no genuine repentance that tries to go halfway. Sometimes people will talk to me about the failure of their marriage (or other relationships) in words like this: “We did everything 50-50” or “I would be willing to meet him/her halfway” or “If she is willing to put her heart into this relationship, I will too.” If my love is such a half-hearted effort, willing to go only as far as the other one goes, that love is doomed. Marriage is not a 50-50 venture. It calls for whole-hearted investment of myself, if it is to survive through the bad times. This is true of love in any sphere. That is why Jesus says, “If you love only those who love you, what credit is it to you?”

God often speaks of His relationship with His people as a marriage. But it is never on a “50-50” basis either. He has given His all, has invested His only Son, has offered Him up 100%, has given Him into death in order to make us His own. Now He invites us to faith, an all-in relationship with Him. Israel often practiced syncretism – that is, the people were willing to do their religious duty to Yahweh, if only they could keep their loyalties to their other gods intact. Give God at least a slice of the pie of your life, even if the slices for work and sports and family and citizenship are bigger. But God would have none of it. “Return to me with all your heart” is His plea to them – and to us. God will have your heart – not just a corner of the heart, but the whole thing is to be dedicated to Him. Our half-heartedness calls for repentance, admitting to God that we have not loved Him with our whole heart, that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

This return to God is a deadly serious thing. It happens, Joel says, “with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” Such signs of grief mark a person as serious about what they seek. Remember King David, after his affair with Bathsheba? A son was born to them, and God struck that child with a deathly sickness. David fasted for many days, he mourned, he tore his clothing, he prayed earnestly, so that his servants gave up ever being able to see him live a normal life again.

Then one day the child died. The servants were afraid to tell him. They feared that David might take his own life. Instead, he got up, washed, dressed, and came to dinner. When they asked him what this was all about, he said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live.’ But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.” His petitions for the child were serious and life-changing – but his trust was placed solely in the Lord, who has final and ultimate control over life and death. Our petitions are to be serious, marked even by fasting and diligent prayer, but always pointed to the God who is our Father through His Son Jesus. We do not practice intentional and serious piety in an attempt to get God on our side. We mourn our self-centeredness in the light of God’s unmerited and incredible grace. We are invited to return to the Lord, our gracious Father.

Martin Luther wrote the 95 Theses against indulgences, by which the church posed itself as being able to pronounce forgiveness for a price. In those theses, Luther began at the point of a life of discipleship. The very first thesis reads this way: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” In other words, repentance is not just a sometime thing, or a part-time recreation, but a lifetime style of living. We are called to a humble, Christ-centered style of discipleship, whole-hearted, serious, and all-encompassing.

Another point about repentance is that it is not showy, but it is a genuine display of commitment. “Rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Jesus made this point in tonight’s Gospel reading. Our practice of piety, prayer, and fasting are not to be done so that others notice and praise us for it. If you are interested primarily in your reputation before people, that will be the extent of your reward for your piety. But if God is truly the focus of that discipleship, then you will know the blessing of His hand, even on your sufferings and trials. The shape of your heart is what matters most, not the abundance of your piety.

The most important thing about repentance is that it reveals a confession about the kind of God one has. “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” Here is the motivation for true repentance. We do not repent properly when that repentance is all about escaping punishment or gaining some reward. A recent episode of the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* portrays one of the main characters, Sheldon, as having been a real pain during a time of illness. He had rejected and ridiculed the help of his friends and had put them down when they tried to help him, using as his excuse the fact that he didn’t feel well. Then, after becoming well again, he discovered that the whole group of friends was planning a weekend road trip without him. He devised a plan whereby he would apologize to each of the people he had hurt, hoping that would convince them to take him with them on their little excursion. He ultimately discovered that his repentance really needed to be genuine, not built on the hope of what he could get from it.

Repentance in the biblical sense of the word always involves faith that leans on God’s promise of forgiveness and acceptance. Repentance involves two things, according to Luther’s explanation of the Office of the Keys. One is turning away from sin with a sincere desire not to follow that path any more. But the other is just as critical, namely turning toward God in Jesus Christ, receiving His pledge and assurance of forgiveness. That means taking God’s word and promise seriously, believing that I have been set right with Him through what Christ has done for me. It means a desperate and full willingness to throw

myself on His mercy.

Consider Jesus' parable of the prodigal son – called by some the parable of the prodigal father, since that father does the unthinkable in his reception of this wasteful and rebellious son. The prodigal comes back home, hoping to gain the place and standing of a slave, willing to put himself under the thumb of the father, if only he can have three square meals and a place to stay. And what does he get? The ring, the robe, the calf, the celebration, and the assurance of the father that he was not a slave, but a son! This father takes a stance toward this son that seems impossible from our human perspective – and he acts, not because of anything the son has done, but purely out of his own mercy and kindness.

Repentance is not something that we do to convince God to accept us, even as slaves. It is the recognition that God is Father even when we have denied and besmirched him by our words and actions. We are not saved by means of our well-crafted repentance. Repentance is simply the road back to the Father. It is not our cunning way of getting God to treat us well. In fact, it is not our doing at all, but it is God's grace moving our hearts to respond to the marvelous, amazing grace that God alone shows in the gift of His Son.

One noted Christian author puts it this way: “It is not repentance that saves me; repentance is the sign that I realize what God has done in Christ Jesus. The danger is to put the emphasis on the effect instead of on the cause. Is it my obedience that puts me right with God? Never! I am put right with God because prior to all else, Christ died. When I turn to God and accept what God reveals, instantly the stupendous atonement of Jesus Christ rushes me into a right relationship with God. By the miracle of God's grace I stand justified, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Jesus has done. The salvation of God does not stand on human logic; it stands on the sacrificial death of Jesus. Sinful men and women can be changed into new creatures by the marvelous work of God in Christ Jesus, which is prior to all our experience.” (Oswald Chambers quoted in *So Great Salvation*, Charles Ryrie, Victor Books, 1989, p. 91ff.)

Conclusion: Repentance, returning to the Lord with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength, is what the life of the believer looks like. Someone has said that if we postpone repentance, we have one more day to repent of and one less day to repent in. Repentance is not something about which to procrastinate. Whatever the armies that we are facing, whether it be plagues of locusts or the Zika virus or Ebola or Korean ICBM's or family instability or personal crises, our trust is to be placed entirely on the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. May this Lord surround you with His forgiveness and His mercy this day and always! And may your response always be to return to this Lord with joy, thanksgiving, and humility! AMEN!