



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092
(262)241-3121 www.stjohnsmequon.org
Email: office@stjohnsmequon.org
Pastor James Tiefel
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)
Email: pastortiefel@gmail.com

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 1, 2023

Repentance and Resolve

“It is by grace you have been saved through faith.” In love we don’t deserve, God forgives our sins for Jesus’ sake and then empowers us to believe what he has done. This is the most important teaching of the Bible and the foundation of Christian truth. Faith is not a lifeless blob, however. Every day faith turns away from sin and strives to live in a way that pleases God. We repent of our sins and resolve to live a life of love.

Sermon

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

The word of the LORD came to me: “What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: ‘The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.

“Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin, they will die for it; because of the sin they have committed they will die. But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and does what is just and right, they will save their life. Because they consider all the offenses they have committed and turn away from them, that person will surely live; they will not die. Yet the Israelites say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Are my ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

“Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

Introduction – The Gospels that are read in most Christian churches on these Sundays in September and October tell us about events that took place on Monday and Tuesday after Palm Sunday. The Jewish religious leaders were convinced that Jesus had go. He was a threat to their traditions and their way of life. And so, they confronted him in the temple areas (where there were big crowds) and tried to make him look bad. Well, Jesus made them look bad instead. He spoke hard words to people who had hard words coming. We heard some of those hard words in today’s Gospel.

Remember the parable? A father asked two sons to work in his vineyard. One son said yes but didn’t go and work. The other son said no but changed his mind and went. Jesus explained: You Jews are like the son who said yes: you keep all the rules but reject God’s Messiah. The son who said no? Those are the tax collectors and prostitutes who are really disgusting to you but turned to me for forgiveness. The point was clear. You rejecting Jews are far worse than these notorious sinners who believe. Hard words. Really hard words.

So what do these hard words say to people who haven't rejected Jesus? And you certainly haven't rejected Jesus. You're here in church almost every Sunday just like you have been for years. You love Jesus, you follow him, you imitate him, and you support his work. Jesus' words to those Jews don't seem to have much to say to Christians.

But there is something here, something that's really important. When he spoke about both the son who said yes and the son who said no Jesus connected their words to their actions. Truth is faith in Jesus is more than what's on our lips; faith is also dirty hands and sore feet and aching backs. Faith is struggling every day to turn away from our sins and faith is resolving every day to do what Jesus wants us to do. Faith is like the son who isn't in the parable, who says yes to Jesus and then gets to work in the vineyard.

When the prophet Ezekiel preached to the people of Israel in the Old Testament he was also speaking to unfaithful Jews—people much different from us. But the lesson he preached in the First Reading is the same lesson Jesus preached in the Gospel: Faith is certainly trust in God but faith is also action for God. Here's the advice we need to take home today:

Remember to Review the Reality of Faith

Ezekiel lived about the same time and in the same place as Daniel, the guy in the lion's den. They were both part of the first wave of captives that the king of Babylon carted off into exile after he captured Jerusalem. The people weren't happy at all; I guess we can't blame them. They had lost their homes and their jobs and their families and their church. The temple was still standing but it was a long way away. They got it into their heads that they were suffering in Babylon for the disloyalty and disobedience of the generations before them: God was punishing them for their sins of their ancestors. This was their little ditty: **The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.** Their parents ate the bad grapes and now they were suffering the heartburn.

That's not the way God works and Ezekiel knew it. Our parents certainly influenced the way we think about God, either for good or bad but in the end we all stand before God on our own. I can't get to heaven just because my mother was a Christian and I won't go to hell just because my father wasn't. The Lord was making exactly that point when he had Ezekiel say: **For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.** And again: **I will judge each of you according to your own ways.**

Everyone deserves hell because of sin and Jesus came to save everyone from hell. Damnation and salvation are both universal. They're both for everyone. The Bible says, **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** What saves us from damnation and gives us salvation is faith in Jesus. We can't work our way out of hell or work our way to heaven. That would take perfect thoughts and words and actions. No one—certainly none of us—can provide anything close to that. The link to life with God, the tie that binds us to Jesus' forgiveness, is faith. The hymn writer says, "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling." In a miracle I can't understand the Holy Spirit lifted my longing to Jesus and connected me to his love. That's faith. Faith means I have put my confidence in Christ.

Faith isn't a collective thing; faith doesn't come from belonging to the right organization or the right church. My faith isn't something I share. Faith is personal. Faith is between me and Jesus and only between me and Jesus. Paul wrote to the Galatians, **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.** We all need to remember to review that reality about faith. There is more to faith than coming from a good family or belonging to the right church or sitting in the usual pew. Nothing wrong with any of that, but faith is more than that. Faith is about looking to Jesus and longing for Jesus and loving Jesus every day.

The problem with the son who said yes was that he was all talk and no action. His yes seemed like faith but he never showed up in the vineyard—no faith. Same problem in Babylon. The exiles considered themselves to be

the children of Abraham and sons of the covenant—good and faithful Jews—but they didn't live that way. Ezekiel showed them how faith in God always connects to actions. Faith and obedience always go together. He wrote that punishment comes to **righteous people who turn from their righteousness and commit sin**. Life comes to wicked people **who turn away from wickedness and do what is right and just**.

Faith in Jesus is more than words. Faith is more than remembering stories learned in Sunday School, more than repeating the Lord's Prayer. Jesus said, **If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit**. You don't tell an apple tree to grow apples. Apple trees grow apples; that's just what they do. Living in love is what faith does. Good works can't ever earn or buy us faith, but good works always follow faith. And why not? Our actions reflect the actions Jesus took for us. In the Second Reading for today, we heard Paul encourage us, **In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus who...humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross**. Faith isn't a dictionary lying on a library desk; faith is a dynamo with wheels that are whirring in love for God and one another. We all need to remember to review that reality about faith.

When Jesus spoke to the leaders of Israel and when Ezekiel spoke to the Jews in Babylon, there was passion and pleading in their voices. **Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!** It wouldn't be right for me to speak to you this morning with the same intensity. By God's grace he has called you to put your trust in Jesus and empowered you to bear fruits of faith. You have shown your faith by your deeds again and again. God be praised! But there are times in our lives, maybe even a few times each day, when we forget what faith is really like. Even as believers, we aren't perfect. The truths we know by heart don't always come through in what we do. So we need to remember each day to review the reality about faith. Faith is what connects me to Christ and faith is what moves me to love. In our own quiet way and all by ourselves we need to go to Jesus **to repent of our sins and rid ourselves of our offenses**. Day after day we need to pray for that **new heart and new spirit** which God promises to provide. We repent and we resolve and that is the nature of faith. Amen.