

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity with the Rite of Holy Baptism for Theodore  
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St. Luke 6:36-42  
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In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit.

It seems to be growing more common among Christians that repentance is being gutted of its weight and meaning. What is true Christian repentance? The Greek word which is translated as “repentance” actually means “to change one’s mind; to feel remorse, repent, be converted”. It is made up of a combination of two other Greek words - “meta” meaning “back” or “again”, and “noew” which means “to grasp; pay heed with intent to act”. In using this word, the Holy Spirit is teaching us that real repentance is not only sorrow over sin but also includes the desire and attempt to make amends whenever possible (as, for example, Zaccheus returned what he had cheated others of) and to turn away from the sin and no longer engage in it (such as the woman caught in adultery). True repentance involves being transformed by the wisdom of Christ, recognizing that your sin isn’t just bad but damning, and turning away from it, hating it, and doing whatever can be done to no longer engage the sinful thoughts and behaviors.

When St. John the Baptist preached repentance the people understood that repentance necessitates a change. It is a shift from what is evil and harmful to that which is good and filled with God’s blessing. They didn’t always necessarily know what to do instead but they understood that repentance, which begins with the recognition that an act is evil and contrary to the Word of God, requires at the very least a desire to change the behavior or way of thinking. Otherwise, if you just continue doing the same thing with no effort to stop, it is clear that you aren’t really sorry for what you have done nor do you fear God’s wrath. In Matthew 3, John said

to the Pharisees “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance...Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mtt. 3:7b-8, 10) After hearing these words, John records in his gospel account that the crowds, in fear, asked John “What then shall we do?” We read similarly in Acts that when St. Peter preached the Pentecost sermon, those who heard “were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” What they were doing and had done was evil. “What shall we do so that we do not suffer the just punishment for our sin?” They clearly recognized something needed to be done so that they didn’t continue in their sin and incur further wrath.

But what I sadly see happening more and more often today is that repentance is being used as a mask to hide behind and continue in sin. “All I have to do is say I’m sorry and I can go my merry way, continuing doing exactly as I have done before because I can be forgiven. Jesus even said ‘Whoever’s sins you forgive, they are forgiven.’ I can just come back next Sunday and confess generally that I am a sinner and the pastor will speak the absolution and I’ll be good to go.” That’s not repentance. That is the abuse of God’s mercy. And to those who operate in that manner, the word of pardon will do you no good because by continuing in your sin and not making any serious efforts to bear the fruit that necessarily must follow repentance, you are denying the forgiveness you have heard. You are making a mockery of it.

If you are truly sorry that you spoke evil of your neighbor by all means repent to him and to God and then, in the joy of that forgiveness, do what you can to restore his good name and reputation. If you stole from your employer by robbing him of your best efforts, then seek his and God’s forgiveness, and in the joy of having been forgiven, give him your best effort moving forward. If you have committed adultery, seek your spouse’s and God’s forgiveness, and then, in the thankfulness for forgiveness, cut

yourself off completely from the source of your adultery - don't continue talking to the one with whom you have been cheating, spend the money to put blockers and monitors on your phone and computers, stop living together before marriage. If you have failed to remember the Sabbath day by not gladly hearing and learning God's Word when they are available to you, then seek the Lord's forgiveness and in the joy of His forgiveness let no excuse whatsoever keep you from His house or keep you from prayer.

And do not think that you get a pass simply because you admit you have no excuse. That is treacherous! It is to spit on the crucified Christ and mock the Blood He poured out to redeem you. It is to say "Yeah, I'm bad but I don't really want or plan to change." True repentance is born of the fear of God's wrath, the recognition that that which I have done, the thoughts of my heart, my failure to love individually and collectively demonstrate clearly that I am a wicked sinner who deserves nothing but God's judgment. Unless God looks upon me in mercy and does not hold my sins against me, I will be lost eternally.

Thus true repentance can actually only be born of faith in Christ. When Jesus says "Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful," we quickly latch on to the command "Be merciful." But did you notice the incredible promise that God is merciful to us? Before we were sorry for our sin, God promised redemption. From before the foundation of the world the death of God's Son under the Father's righteous wrath against our sin was planned. God is merciful - quick to forgive and slow to anger. We were blind and dead enemies of God, raging against Him, hating His divine will revealed in the Ten Commandments. We had no way of saving ourselves. When we tried to stack up works that we thought were pleasing, they were nothing but filth. We tried things that seemed more holy than the commandments and they certainly looked that way from the outside but our hearts remained enraged against God. We could only either be filled with arrogance, imagining that what we had done was enough or despair, knowing that nothing could ever be enough. Nothing we do or are or have merit

anything before God. We lie, we steal, we deceive, we bear grudges, we indulge our flesh and let the sinful world dictate our thinking. We ignore our spouses and children. We refuse to learn the Word of God.

And for all that, for our mountain of wickedness and perversity which spells certain death for all people, God has willingly poured out the precious Blood of His Son, His only Son, His perfect and obedient Son. He has covered the crimson red of our sin so that we wouldn't suffer it's terrible and eternal consequences. He didn't do it for those who are worthy - there aren't any. He didn't do it because He had to. He would have been justified to condemn us. He did it because He is merciful and wants not a single person to suffer the terrible price of his sin. It is as though we willingly strapped a 200lb weight around our neck and threw ourselves into the ocean. We are drowning of our own doing. But Christ plunged Himself into the ocean, untied the weight and tied it on Himself instead, and allowed it to drown Him so that we might live.

God has been abundantly rich in His mercy toward us. He asked nothing in return. What could we give even if He did? What foolishness would it be then for us to go grab another 200lb weight and march back into the ocean? What folly to be forgiven of the horrible guilt of our sin and then knowingly go out and seek more? Should we be forgiven all our trespasses and then refuse to forgive our neighbor? Should we be delivered of the terrible debt of our sin and promptly run out and accumulate more? Of course not.

Baptized of the Lord, you have been spared death. God the Father has mercifully cancelled the debt of your disobedience by the Blood of Christ. In Baptism, as has again happened this most joyous day for Theodore, your guilt has been washed away and you have been raised from the death of sin to new life, a life other than you had before. Your Old Adam with all of its selfish thoughts and sinful desires has been drowned and died. You have been given the new birth and the Holy Spirit who conforms your

thoughts and your will to God's own. Raised from the dead, we are to think only on those things that are true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable. Christ is now our wisdom. We are dead to sin and to the perverse, materialistic, godless thinking of the world. In Christ, you are a new creation. When asked by his conscience-stricken hearers what to do to end their terror, Paul responded quite unexpectedly "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Ac 2:38-39)

Put away from yourselves all that the world values most highly, its love of power and money, its constant lusting and covetousness, its hatred and greed. Turn away from the desires of your flesh and discipline it through prayer and fasting. Stop giving the wickedness of the world a pass by turning blind eyes and ears to it as it floods over radios and televisions and computers. Treasure as your highest good those things that Christ bestows - His Word, forgiveness, the Holy Sacraments, love, gentleness, mercy. These are the good. These are the fruits of repentance, the rejection of death. Forgiveness is not the blank check to continue in sin. It is the invitation to leave it and the terror of God's wrath that it breeds. As St. Paul writes in Romans chapter 6 "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:1-2)

To be sure, though you have been cleansed in Holy Baptism, you will still suffer temptation because you haven't yet been taken out of this world. Your flesh will still hound you and seek to cast you back into the depths of the sea to drown in your guilt. God's children on this side of glory have not yet reached perfection. That is why we need God's mercy daily and why He so gladly bestows it. It is why He arms you with His Word so that hearing and meditating on it morning, noon, and night you may fight and resist by the strength of the Holy Spirit. It is why He commands you to pray

without ceasing, seeking His counsel and aid and strength. It is why He gives you your brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow soldiers to support you in your need and for you to support in theirs. And when in weakness you fall, when you are deceived and your conscience is pricked, do not despair. Run to the mercy of God which is poured out to you. Run to the absolution purchased by the Blood of God's Son. Cry out to your heavenly Father who hears the cries of needy and delivers them. Remember your Baptism. Eat the Body and drink the Blood of Christ that are the perpetual fount and source of God's rich mercy and forgiveness. These things are given precisely to strengthen your faith and turn you in love toward God and toward your neighbor.

Repent. Repent and flee from your sin because God the Father is merciful and loves to forgive sinners.

In the Name of +Jesus.