

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

As Jesus begins His ministry, He goes forth preaching “*saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’*” (Matt. 4:17). Martin Luther takes note of this preaching as he objected to the Roman Catholic teaching of “doing penance,” and began his 95 Theses asserting that Jesus’ preaching makes repentance an important part of being a Christian. Jesus “willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance,” he said (Luther’s Works, 31:25). Repentance is on Jesus’ mind as He teaches His disciples today.

Jesus teaches us today that repentance begins with humility — that’s not so easy. It goes against our old Adam, and he does not submit willingly. Indeed, he is often ascendant in our life, as he was in the disciples’ lives. You might think that they would have gotten it by now by Jesus’ own example, but they apparently hadn’t. “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*” they asked. And I don’t think there’s any doubt ... they were asking about themselves. “Which one of US will be the greatest?”

We imagine what this greatness might be, that greatness in the kingdom is surely like greatness in the world. We’d be wrong. Greatness in the world is about power; it’s about exercising authority over others, and lording it over them (Matt. 20:25). It’s about being called great by others by doing great things; it’s imagining yourself great because of your celebrity or athleticism, or because of your wealth and influence (Luke 1:51-53). But none of these is greatness in the kingdom of heaven, and none of these brings people to their knees in repentance. Jesus says greatness is found in humility and dependence — and later servanthood in the manner of Christ, for “*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Matt. 20:28).

Jesus illustrates this distinction using the example of a little child. You’ve got to “*turn and become like children,*” He said, to be great in the kingdom of heaven. “*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*”

This illustration would have been hard for the disciples to hear. Unlike our time, children in that day “were not admirable.” They “were regarded as inferior because they are not guided by rational thinking.” They were “physically weak, subject to the will of adults, and susceptible to sickness” (Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 891).

Thus, accepting this illustration, the disciples would have understood that to be humble like a child before God is to admit that we are not admirable, that our thinking is often not guided by God’s reasonable and enduring word, that we are weak, sick with sin, easily swayed by the influence of ungodly people, that we are dependent on God for our survival, for our good. But that humility leads to repentance!

And we can see by this text that Jesus is quite serious about this repentance thing. He goes on to explain with a metaphor and a bit of hyperbole that our sin and the things we do that cause others to sin are worthy of condemnation and even eternal death: limbs cut off, eyes plucked out, a millstone hung around a neck and drowned in the depth of the sea.

And, indeed, this drowning metaphor is apropos for Christians who begin their life in Christ's kingdom by passing through water and becoming God's children. Then daily we hang a millstone not around our neck but around the neck of the Old Adam who daily causes us to sin, and by contrition and repentance we drown him along with our sins and evil desires. And we, who through this sacrament all became "*little ones*" before God, can be comforted that God sends His ministering spirits, the angels who are ever in the Father's presence, to take care of us and protect us from the evil foe, as we pray in Luther's morning and evening prayer.

But Jesus is not done with His teaching on repentance, though Luke makes the repentance connection for us. Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. A man has 100 sheep, but one wanders off and is lost. The man leaves the 99 and goes out in search of the one. He finds the one and returns it to the fold with much rejoicing. Again, St. Luke's version of this parable has Jesus making the repentance connection for us: "*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*" (Luke 15:7).

But there is danger in the parable, lest you, in your pride, think yourself one of the 99 who need no repentance, for consider: if you need no repentance, then you need no forgiveness, and if you need no forgiveness, then you need no Jesus, no sacrifice, no blood, no Savior. No! Such self-styled "*righteous persons*" (Luke 15:7) exist only in the imaginations of their hearts, and such sheep are not brought home but scattered and devoured by wolves and roaring lions.

But for the one sheep who is lost, who bleats for help, rejoice that the Father's will is that not "*one of these little ones should perish.*" And so He sent His own Son to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10; Matt. 18:11). Into the wilderness of sinful man, He sent His own Son as both the lamb bearing our iniquities (John 1:29), the lamb led to the slaughter (Is. 53:7), and as the shepherd who would save His people and bless the Lord's heritage (Ps. 28:9), leading His flock, gathering His lambs into His arms, and carrying them in His bosom (Is. 40:11). This remains the church's message. Jesus after His resurrection instructed us to preach it along with repentance and the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake.

Of course, the hope would be that every Christian living a life of repentance would recognize his faults and repent of them. But such a hope in this life is

foolish for it ignores the weakness of our flesh, the allure of power, our sinful pride. And so Jesus instructs us how to live a life of repentance as we work toward reconciliation with those who have sinned against us. It's not easy; it requires a bit of humility on all sides; but the fruit that can result from this process is marvelous in the church, for the hope is that you gain your brother, that peace may reign, that there is rejoicing in heaven over the sheep that was found.

Lastly, in this teaching on repentance, Jesus reminds us of the ministry that He Himself establishes in the church, a ministry of repentance, of confession and forgiveness. Repeating and expanding on what He said to the disciples earlier addressing Peter as their representative, He instructs us what the church is to be doing: she, through her ministers, is not only to be preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins, but she is to be bestowing it. *“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”*

This is His encouragement to us to take advantage of all the means of grace that God offers to aid in our repentance, including the Office of the Keys, as we teach it in the catechism: “when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.” This is, in part, why Christ gives His church pastors; it's why you have called me: to speak this forgiveness on your behalf. And remember, your pastor will not be shocked to hear that you are a sinner. Avail yourself of this grace.

Jesus' words to us today are all about repentance: not of exaltation (who's the greatest) but of humbling ourselves, and living in repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. God grant that His church ever be about the task of calling sinners to repentance and proclaiming our salvation in Christ Jesus, who seeks and saves. And God grant that His church ever join Him in rejoicing over the sinner who repents and is restored and who comes again to the Lord's table to taste the goodness of the Lord. God grant it for the sake of Jesus.

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