

January 22, 2017

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

“The Blessing of ‘Repent’”

Matthew 4:12-25

In written blogs, talk shows and simple conversations among friends talking about today’s modern culture a common lament surfaces quite often; that some group or maybe just people in general have developed a “sense of entitlement”. A playwright named Christy Hall describes it this way: “The American dream now is a sense of entitlement where people not only want what they want, but they want it right now and they don’t really want to work for it.”

I think millennials are bearing the brunt of this; there are lots of writings about campus “safe places” and recent college graduates who think right out of school they are entitled to an advanced position paying big bucks in whatever field they choose. But I’ve heard tales of patrons of all ages waltzing into a business or government agency and expecting everything to serve them, even if they have no clue what they want and are lacking basic required information to accomplish whatever the transaction. And I’ve literally experienced it with a needy person coming to the church and expecting to be housed, fed and clothed because he just got out of prison and served his time and nobody will help him...and then he got really angry at me when I told him our church couldn’t do all that.

We consider such situations where people think just because they suck oxygen they have a right to privilege and shake our heads and mutter, “What a sense of entitlement...disgusting.” As a Christian, one really should pause and consider if that’s me being a real hypocrite.

We read today in Matthew’s Gospel of Jesus Christ making His very first public proclamation. It is similar to Mark’s Gospel and it echoes what John the Baptist proclaimed, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*”

Now this is going to be a bit dicey as a sermon because the Gospel good news is that this kingdom, this reigning of heaven, has broken into history and humanity in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This true man and true God will do everything humanly necessary to keep God’s good Law on our behalf, and then He will die bearing the burden of our sins on our behalf. His Easter resurrection confirms His victory; that all has been done that needs be done to gain our salvation.

Yet the proclamation is not, “Suck oxygen and be saved.” It’s not, “Sin however you please and be forgiven.” It’s not, “You so deserve this gift just because you’re you.” It is a great Gospel good news proclamation, but it is prefaced with an imperative command, “Repent.”

“Repent” in the simplest sense means to turn; to change direction away from sin. Martin Luther and the reformers flush it out a bit more in our foundational document, the Augsburg Confession, Article Twelve: “Now properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace. Then improvement should also follow, and a person should refrain from sins. For these should be the fruits of repentance, as John (the Baptist) says in Matthew 3: *Bear fruit worthy of repentance.*”

Now I want to be very careful here. I am not saying that the quality or purity of your repentance is what gains you forgiveness. Jesus Christ has done that and because of that heaven’s kingdom stands as near to you as the sound of His Word in your ears. But repentance seeks this Gospel, this reigning of heaven. Repentance flees the sins of the world to joyfully run into the wide open arms of Christ.

But I fear many Christians are little brats with a sense of entitlement. I'm scared that behind the confession of sins hearts are really saying, "I suck oxygen, so fork over the forgiveness." I'm concerned that folks see Almighty God as the big giver in the sky and we have a right to all His benefits, "*a sense of entitlement where people not only want what they want, but they want it right now and they don't really want to work for it.*" That work of course being the "repent" that Jesus and the prophets and apostles clearly call for.

Why do I fear this? Well, I can look around this gathering and see quite a number of people who regularly exclaim, "Oh God!" or "Jesus Christ" and don't give it a second thought. "*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.*" That's God's Second Commandment. But it doesn't seem like some Christians are making any effort to honor it, to improve, to repent in practice.

I've been here nearly ten years. I can count the number of weddings I've done for couples not living together before the wedding on one hand. I hear about the content of some of the shows folks are watching and I don't even want to consider some web surfing practices. The Sixth Commandment calls for us to "lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do." It seems many Christians aren't turning from lust; they're looking forward to tomorrow's episode!

Younger folks give a wink and a nod to illegal downloads of music and media. Older folks seem comfortable hating others of different politics, religion or race. We raise ourselves up in self-righteousness and entitlement to God's favor or simply get comfortable in sin and worldliness apart from Him. Either way, it's really dangerous.

We can and should approach God's presence fearfully and joyfully, prizing above all else the holiness of His name placed on us in Baptism and the entrance to the kingdom of heaven He freely grants through the blood of Christ. This is repentance, and flowing from this should be the desire followed by effort to live out that gift in what we say, do and think. We must not let our confession become an entitled, "Here I am again. Fork over the goods so I can get on with my week."

"*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" This is both Christ's command and invitation. It's comforting to note that right after saying this Jesus starts walking around and calling disciples to Himself. He is doing the same thing to you this very moment. Yes, "repent" is a command and the Law is most certainly there defining those sins from which we turn away. But it is more so Gospel good news, because by the power of Christ's forgiveness you have been enabled to turn. You have been forgiven, made holy and called to follow Jesus into His kingdom this day and forever! "Repent" is awesome. "Repent" is not an entitlement, it's the gift and invitation of God.

The alternative to "repent"? Well, think about it. Think about your life, your rebellion, your sin. The alternative to "repent" is that to which all of that entitles you. That's not the kingdom you want.

No, Repent! Turn to Christ and away from your sin. Do it in word here in church. Do it in practice in all of your life. Make a plan of action if it will help. But make the effort. Repent.

Then come back before your God in prayer at home or confession in the Divine Service and repent! Repent of your lack of repentance. Repent of feeling entitled to anything. Repent of not recognizing the kingdom of heaven stands at hand. Then fearfully and joyfully forgiven, be received right in.

Amen.