

Repentance

Matthew 3:1-12

The Second Sunday in Advent, December 4, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

In conversations with several members of the congregation I have noticed some holes in our understanding of what repentance is. It is not that any of you get it wrong. It is that many of you do not get it in its entirety. So since John the Baptist is preaching it, let us talk about what it is and what it is not.

Repentance is not something that takes place apart from one of God's institutions. Or to put it another way, you cannot appeal to one of God's institutions without repentance and expect to be saved.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees tried to do this. They appealed to their descent from Abraham to be saved.

You have to acknowledge that the descendants of Abraham are God's institution. God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. God fulfilled this promise in spite of the fact that his wife, Sarah, was barren. God miraculously provided them with a son, Isaac. This miraculous providence of a son was God's way of saying that He was the One who was fulfilling the promise that He had made to Abraham of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Even when Isaac married, initially Rebekah was barren. Isaac prayed for her and then she had children. Once again God was demonstrating that He was the One who was fulfilling His promise to give Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.

Furthermore God had promised them that He would channel His blessings to the nations through them. They are the nation through whom God placed His presence on the earth, both in the tabernacle in the Old Testament and in our Lord's body in the New Testament.

Therefore when the Pharisees and Sadducees claim salvation because they are descendants of Abraham, they are claiming God's institution for salvation. The problem is that they are doing it apart from repentance.

The institutions of God do not save without repentance. Therefore repentance is not the mere claim of a Divine Institution. That is why when Peter preaches his first sermon on the Day of Pentecost he tells the people, "Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins."

Baptism is a divine institution. God told His apostles to baptize the nations and to instruct them in everything that He had commanded them. God promises that Baptism now saves you. God promises you resurrection from the dead in and through Baptism. God promises you the Holy Spirit in and through Baptism. God promises to hear your prayers in and through Baptism. The list goes on and on of the saving benefits of Baptism.

Yet in spite of the fact that Baptism is God's institution, you cannot appeal to Baptism for salvation apart from repentance. If you do, then you make Baptism into magic or spell casting thinking that it works just because you did it.

That is why Peter says, "Repent and let each of you be baptized," and why our Lord commands baptism and instruction to make disciples. We do no one any service whatsoever if we baptize without the instruction. Without the instruction there is no repentance and without repentance baptism does you no good even if it is an institution of God.

Repentance is not the mere claim of an institution for salvation even if that institution is from God Himself.

Therefore the same applies to the Sacrament of the Altar. You cannot claim salvation at the Sacrament of the Altar apart from repentance. You cannot claim membership at Immanuel Lutheran Church for salvation apart from repentance even though Immanuel Lutheran Church is God's institution.

I tell you that God can raise up from the rocks in the parking lot members of Immanuel Lutheran Church who are baptized and attend the Sacrament of the Altar.

And if the institutions of God do not save apart from repentance do not even think of trying the stuff that you have made up on your own in order to be saved. The institutions of man will surely not save you apart from repentance.

Therefore repentance is not merely the claim of a divine institution for salvation. That is why repentance is added to the Divine Institutions for salvation. Don't get me wrong. It is the claim of the Divine Institution. Baptism does save you. It does forgive you. It does give you the Holy Spirit. But repentance is not merely the claim of the Divine Institution.

Repentance is that status of a person's heart that exists when the person acknowledges that Jesus is his or her judge. Let me say that again. Repentance is that status of a person's heart that acknowledges that Jesus from Nazareth is his or her judge.

John the Baptist teaches us that even in his day the axe was laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. The judgment is not merely something that takes place at the end of time although it does take place at the end of time. The judgment is something that has been taking place since Jesus came the first time. Notice what John the Baptist says, "The axe is already at the root of the trees." That means that at the time when John said it the axe of God's judgment was already at the root of the trees and every tree that did not bear good fruit was cut down and thrown into the fire.

Jesus is that judge because John the Baptist further instructs us that Jesus will judge us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. While it is possible that John the Baptist could have been referring to the fact that tongues of fire rested on the disciples heads when the Holy Spirit came in light of the fact that he just talked about the trees being thrown into the fire in the judgment it is safer to conclude that the fire into which Jesus baptizes people is the fire of hell. Therefore Jesus either baptizes you with the Holy Spirit or He baptizes you with hell fire. That means that Jesus is the judge who determines who is saved and who is not. He delivers sentence on all of humanity. There are no exceptions.

God the Father has proven that Jesus has the authority to judge everyone. He raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is therefore the Lord of both the living and the dead. Jesus therefore has the authority to judge both the living and the dead. He began His judgments when He came the first time. He continues His judgments through the office of the Holy Ministry and He will conclude His judgments on a great white throne at the end of time.

Repentance is the status of a person's heart who acknowledges that this is true.

A person who is not repentant refuses to acknowledge that Jesus is judge. He or she refuses to acknowledge the Word of Jesus as a legitimate authority. A person who is repentant acknowledges that Jesus is a judge and therefore listens to what the judge has to say.

Because of this a person who is repentant will confess his sins.

Repentance is that status of a person's heart who confesses his sins.

A repentant person acknowledges that Jesus is his judge. The repentant person therefore listens to what the judge has to say. The judge points out the sins of a repentant person and the repentant person acknowledges them. A repentant person admits that he is a liar, a thief, greedy and covetous, lustful. A repentant person will acknowledge that he is a murderer and an adulterer. A repentant person is often so involved in confessing his own sins, that he may not even notice the sins of others and if he does he is ready and willing to forgive them. After all, he knows that he is no better.

A repentant person will acknowledge his faithlessness. A repentant person acknowledges that he has not feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things. Repentance is that status of a person's heart who acknowledges that he has had other gods and worshipped them and that these gods have not saved him.

Repentance is that status of a person's heart that does not make excuses for his actions, does not try to defend his sins and make them seem right, and that does not try to shift blame onto someone else. And some of you do try to shift blame onto someone else. Your favorite person to blame is Adam. Since sin entered into the world through one man, Adam, and death through sin and death came to all men because all sinned, many of you try to blame Adam for the sins that you have committed. You imagine that the only reason that you are a sinner is because you were born that way in the image of Adam. But that is not what the doctrine of original sin means. When the psalter teaches you that you were conceived and born in sin that does not mean that you can blame Adam for the things that you have done. That simply means that you are living in a sinful status from which you cannot save yourself. The doctrines of Romans five and the account in Genesis three mean this: if you had been made perfect like Adam and had been presented with the exact same choice as he did, you would have done the same thing that he did. A person who is repentant acknowledges that this is true. A person who is not repentant continues to imagine that if they had been there in the beginning they would have done better.

Repentance is that status of a person's heart that hears the judgments of Jesus and acknowledges that those judgments are true of him also.

This is why repentance and God's institutions always go together. God's institutions forgive. A repentant person receives the forgiveness of his sins with great joy. An unrepentant person refuses to admit that he even has sins, and therefore either despises God's institutions of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar or like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, in his heart he changes baptism and the sacrament of the altar into religious good deeds that he does in order to look good in the eyes of others. The condemnation of such a person is deserved.

Repentance is that status of a person's heart that bears fruit.

What fruit does a repentant person bear? The main fruit is the fruit of confession. The people who go out to John the Baptist to be baptized go out there confessing their sins. They acknowledge the coming judge and they acknowledge their culpability before Him.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, do not record how the people confessed their sins. Did John have a confessional booth off to the side where he heard confession before he baptized people? Did John have them recite a corporate confession and absolution like we do in the Divine Service? How was this done? I have said before that the main way it was done was when the people were baptized. If they were baptized for the forgiveness of sins, then by definition they were confessing their sins when they were baptized. They wanted forgiveness. If you want forgiveness then you admit that you are a sinner. That is confessing your sins. To be baptized for any other reason makes you a hypocrite, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

A heart who lives in the status of repentance may not confess every last thing that they did. They may not know or remember every last thing that they did. They do not need to because they live in the status of repentance. But if confronted with a word of Jesus that condemns them, the person who lives in the status of repentance will admit it.

That is the primary fruit of repentance. Then comes the secondary fruits of the works and deeds that are changed in conformity with the confession of their sins. But the main one is to confess.

And this repentance is the way of the Lord that is prepared.

When you think about it, why would the Lord need His way prepared? Can't He just come without preparation? The answer is yes He could. He is the Lord and He can come whenever He likes. But when He came in judgment those two thousand years ago, His way was prepared in the face that hearts were living the status of repentance. That can mean only one thing: that in spite of the fact that He came to judge, He came to exercise His judgments in mercy. He came to forgive.

The one who lives in the status of repentance is therefore ready for His coming, whenever and however it is that He comes whether in sacraments or in glory.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.