

Sharing the Love of Christ: It's a Matter of Life and Death

September 27, 2020

Third in a series of three sermons based on our Mission Statement, “Empowered by God’s Word, we joyfully share the Love of Jesus with all people.”

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Ezekiel 18:32 - Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life....For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn and live.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Three weeks ago, we learned from Romans 13 that sharing the love of Christ is our obligation. We explored the paradox that we are debt free and seriously in debt at the same time. Obligation - free towards God due to the fact that Jesus Christ made a once and for all payment on our behalf on the cross and yet at the same time fully and daily and deeply obligated to live a life of love towards our neighbors.

Last week, we learned from Philippians 1 that sharing the love of Christ is contagious. We explored how St. Paul being chained 18 inches away from dozens of Imperial Guards over a two-year period of time served to make the advance the Gospel.

Today we learn from all three appointed lessons that sharing the love of Christ and encouraging family and friends towards repentance is a matter of life and death. Three lessons we want to learn today about the seriousness of living out our Mission Statement here at St. Paul Lutheran.

Lesson #1 is that without repentance, we are on a collision course with eternal death.

I remember a time when our youngest son Noah was of pre-school age, and he was playing downstairs in our parsonage basement by himself. All of a sudden, we heard a crash of some sort, perhaps a lamp being knocked over and broken, and as I started down the stairs, he was coming up. Before I could say anything, he blurted out, “I didn’t do it!” To which I replied, “Didn’t do what?” If I remember correctly, it took a few minutes before he admitted what had happened.

So also with the people of Ezekiel’s day. Two mistakes they were making. Mistake #1 was that they weren’t admitting their wickedness, they were blaming it on their parents and grandparents. They were quoting a proverb that really irritated God. The proverb was “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Instead of taking personal responsibility for their own sinful life patterns, they were making excuses. They were blaming the previous generations for giving into pagan influence.

To which the Lord replied, “I don’t want to hear it. I swear to you that you will quit quoting that proverb. All souls are mine. The souls of the fathers are mine and the souls of the sons

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are mine, and the soul who sins shall die. Where there is no repentance, there will be no forgiveness, and where there is no forgiveness there will be death.

Mistake #2 of the people of Ezekiel’s day is that they were blaming God. They were claiming the ways of God were not just. They remind us of us when we wonder why God is letting bad things happen to us “good people.” They remind us of us when we stumble into the mindset that we deserve better life situations than we are getting. They remind us of us when we see all the nastiness and all of the bad behavior prevalent in our society and we ask “what’s wrong with those people out there?” instead of asking, “what’s wrong with me?” and as a congregation, “what’s wrong with us?”

Lesson #1 is that without repentance, we are on a collision course with eternal death. The kingdom of God is like a man with a bad temper who looks in the mirror one night, he realizes the damage he is doing, he understands that if he doesn’t change his ways, it’s not going to end well. It’s like a woman who has stumbled into a ditch full of bitterness and resentment, she realizes the harm she is doing, she understands that if she doesn’t clean up her act, there will be permanent damage to the people she cares about the most.

Lesson #2 is The unifying theme of Scripture is God’s great desire to turn us around, that we might live.

God's great desire to turn us around by way of repentance, we find in the last verse of our Old Testament lesson, **“For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn and live.”** Which explains why the Son of God came from heaven above to earth below. Which explains why Jesus Christ didn’t just dwell among us for a time, He carried through in a perfect way here on earth the will of His Father in heaven. It explains why Jesus lived the blameless and innocent life we could never come close to living, it explains why He suffered all that we should have suffered, it explains why He cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane, Father, not my will, but yours be done.

The fact that God takes no pleasure in the eternal death of anyone, to use Philippians 2 language, explains the mindset of Christ who took on the form of a servant, he was born in the likeness of men, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, he went so far as to be crucified until he was dead and buried.

Exhibit #1 of God’s powerful love working a 180-degree turnaround in the lives of real people is in our Gospel lesson for today, where Jesus declares to the religious leaders of His day, **“Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”**

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The context of that declaration is a parable where the man asks one son and asks him to work in the vineyard. The first says that he won't and then he repents, he changes his mind, and he goes. The same question to the second son, and he answers “yes, sir, I will go,” and then he did not go. In this parable, the first son represents the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the drunkards and the gluttons and the open sinners of Jesus' day. They fall into all kinds of wickedness, but then by the grace of God and by the invitation of Jesus, they repent, they are turned around, and they are forgiven. The second son represents the chief priests and the elders and the Pharisees, the religious leaders who say yes to the one true God, but then their lives do not reflect the life of repentance. The man represents God, who is always inviting and yearning for broken and contrite sinners to be admitting their faults and their failures, so that the grace of God might prevail.

The unifying theme of all Holy Scripture is the desire of the Triune God to draw sinners close, to hold them close, and to change their hearts from the inside out. Dear friends, understand that to this very day, God's Spirit is still on the move. Through the preaching and teaching of His inspired Word, God is pursuing anybody that is willing to sit still and listen. Through words of absolution and through the faithful administration of the Sacraments the Spirit of God is pursuing and drawing near and holding close and advancing the kingdom.

But Pastor Griffin, you say, the kingdom of God doesn't seem to be advancing these days, at least in the USA. I agree. Recent research by George Barna indicates that in the year 2000 45% of Americans were practicing Christians, and in 2019 that percentage had declined to 25%. Practicing Christians are defined in this study as those who agree strongly that faith is very important and attend church at least monthly. In that same survey, those who identified as non-Christians jumped from 20% in 2000 to 30% in 2019. To make you feel even more depressed, 2020 research suggests that one third of practicing Christians have yet to return to church because of Covid-19.

All of which makes our newly revised Mission Statement seem even more timely and well said, “Empowered by God's Word, we joyfully share the Love of Jesus with all people.”

The Kingdom of God is like grandparents who will not give up their grandchildren and great grandchildren who have drifted away from Christ and His Church. They keep on praying, they keep on inviting, they keep on living in such a way that loved ones will be attracted to their Savior. They believe with all of their being that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to soften up the most hardened of hearts. Which brings us to our final point today.

Lesson #3 is that as often as it meets up with the Light, darkness doesn't have a prayer.

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The Psalmist said it this way, **“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”**

Paul said it this way to the Philippians, **Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world. Holding fast to the word of life so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.**

When I read these words about living your life not with grumbling and questioning, but with a blameless and innocent manner, I can't help but think of my friend Gail. Gail was and is a member of the Janesville congregation, she had a serious illness in her early 20's which affected her ability to walk and to remember and to function at a high level. She spent over 25 years stuffing the Trinity Lutheran bulletins every Friday afternoon. She worked part time for almost 30 years at a local nursing home, mainly doing laundry and then delivering clean and fresh laundry to the residents. Gail was and is one of the most consistently cheerful people I've ever met. It was literally impossible to stay crabby or grouchy or petty in Gail's presence. Over the years, the Holy Spirit had taken hold of her heart, Jesus Christ had held her close, and in the presence of her Gospel light, spiritual darkness didn't have a prayer.

The Apostle John, also known as the Apostle of love, wrote it this way, ***This is the message we have heard from Christ, and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all***

The kingdom of God is like a congregation full of Gails. They believe that as often as they shine their Gospel lights, the Holy Spirit is going to be on the move. They realize that adversity is God's way of getting people in a position where they will pay attention to what He is wanting to teach them. They know by faith that the Gospel of Christ will be more likely to advance as often as they find a way to be kind and patient with each other, it will be more likely to advance when they are of the same mind and confession, it will be more likely to advance when they do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than themselves.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who know that wherever there is repentance, there is forgiveness and there is life and there is salvation. They know that Jesus has invited them to join Him on His mission to seek and to search for and to save lost souls. They know that shining their little Gospel lights all over the neighborhood will never be in vain, even though it may seem like it. And finally, they know that when it comes time to share the love of Jesus, actions speak louder than words. In Jesus' Name. Amen.