

Reformation Sunday
November 3, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Reformation Begins with Repentance

1. The sorrow of contrition
2. The peace of forgiveness

Matthew 4:17

“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Fellow Heirs of the Reformation,

Some call it the Protestant Revolt. We Lutherans prefer to call it the Reformation because the word “revolt” suggests that this movement was at its core an act of defiance against authorities in the church. “Reformation,” on the other hand, (from “reform”) suggests that the intention was to amend or improve the church by removing faults or abuses. That’s certainly more in keeping with what we read in the 95 Theses. Luther introduced the theses this way: ***“Out of love and zeal for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following theses will be publicly discussed at Wittenberg under the chairmanship of the reverend father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology...”***

Luther didn’t question the authority of the Pope or his bishops in the theses. In fact he wrote the theses under the assumption that the Pope must not know what the indulgence sellers were doing in Germany or he would have quickly put a stop to it. The 95 Theses were not the work of a revolutionary bent on defiance, but of a loyal son of the church zealous to bring the truth to light in order to provide better care for souls. That is why what Luther proposes is not a restructuring of the organization of the church or a discount on the price of indulgences. No, he wanted change within so he proposed a discussion of doctrine, specifically the doctrine of repentance.

Now it’s true that Luther didn’t think much of his 95 Theses later in his career. It’s been said that what Luther wrote in the theses gives evidence that he still believed at least 15 distinctively Roman Catholic doctrines at that time. That may be why Luther later suggested that any remaining copies of the theses should be burned. But what the theses are clear about is that **Reformation Begins with Repentance**. And repentance, in the broad sense of the word, is 1] the sorrow of contrition and 2] the peace of forgiveness.

1. The sorrow of contrition

“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’” I’d like to focus on this verse because it’s the verse Luther quotes in the first of the 95 Theses. “Repent!” That’s always seemed to me like a strange

choice of words for Jesus' first public pronouncement. I suppose I expected that he'd say at the outset of his public ministry, "Here I am! Your waiting is over. I am the one who fulfills all the prophecies." Instead, the Messiah opens his mouth and says, "Repent!" It means literally to have a change of mind. Martin Luther defined repentance this way: "Repentance is begun when we acknowledge our sins and are sincerely sorry for them; it is completed when trust in the mercy of God comes to this sorrow and hearts are converted to God and long for the forgiveness of sins."

In this light it makes sense that Jesus, as he began his ministry, would call for contrition, that is, for the sorrowful, even terrified, acknowledgement of sin. Before you could appreciate the coming of Jesus, you had to know why you needed him to come. You had to see your sin in all its ugliness. You had to acknowledge that you deserved nothing but God's anger. You had to despair of saving yourself. If you didn't—if you retained even a slender ray of hope that you could be your own savior—you wouldn't know what to make of a lowly, suffering Messiah like Jesus. That explains why the Pharisees, who thought they were righteous, scorned the call to repent, while tax collectors and prostitutes, who knew they weren't righteous, flocked to Jesus.

Just as there was resistance to Jesus' call to repent, so there was resistance to true repentance in Luther's time. Luther wasted no time in getting to the heart of the matter with his 95 Theses. He wrote in the first thesis: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." An unfortunate translation in the Latin Bible in use at that time translated Jesus' call, "Repent!" with two words: "Do penance." This left the impression that it was a command to perform the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance. That meant confessing your sins by listing them all to a priest, and then carrying out the works of satisfaction he prescribed. The idea that you could provide satisfaction for your own sins was bad enough, but then came John Tetzel and the indulgence sellers. They made extravagant claims. They said that the cross emblazoned with the papal coat of arms and set up by the indulgence preachers, was equal in worth to the cross of Christ. They said that as soon as the money for indulgences clinked into the money chest, the ransomed soul flew out of purgatory. And in the popular mind they were selling a substitute for repentance. Thus Luther's lead statement: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." In view of the rampant abuses, it sounds like a reasonable starting point for reform. But when the leaders of the church figured out what Luther was calling for, they wanted only one word from him: "Revoco." ("I recant.")

The festival of Reformation, though, is not an occasion for smug satisfaction and self-congratulation among us. We still need reforming, too, and that begins with repentance. We struggle, too, with the simple command, "Repent!" Witness the outrage that resulted when some preachers suggested that the September 11

attacks on our country ought to lead us Americans to repent of our sins. The mere suggestion that God might have been speaking to us about our immorality or our materialism through those attacks was greeted with a hot chorus of hisses. And yet Jesus, when he was told about a disaster that resulted in a sudden, horrifying loss of life in his day, said what? **“Unless you repent, you too will all perish.”** (Luke 13:3) The idea that we can have salvation without repentance cheapens the grace of God. The idea that we have nothing of which to repent makes God a liar. Let me get at the issue this way. You’re saved, aren’t you? From what are you saved? From your sins? That’s true. But what were your sins going to cost you? Death, right? **“The wages of sin is death.”** But who is it that is going to send us to hell if we don’t repent? It’s God. St. Paul writes in Romans, **“But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”** (2:5) Our problem is not just that we occasionally lapse and fall into anger, lust, or selfishness. Our problem is that we are by nature God’s enemies and the objects of his wrath. The sins that we say and do just bear witness to the justice of that verdict.

But what I’ve said to you to this point is what is called God’s alien work. The work of his law, which terrifies us with the knowledge of our sins and what we deserve on account of our sins, is God’s alien (strange) work. His proper work is to give us spiritual life and to comfort us with the good news of Jesus. But he terrifies us first with his law because a person who does not feel God’s wrath against his sin will see no need for the comforting that Jesus came to do. While the first part of repentance is the sorrow and terror of contrition, the second part of repentance is the peace of forgiveness.

2. The peace of forgiveness

The setting for Matthew 4:17 and Jesus’ call to repent is the beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Galilee, sitting as it did on the border with heathen countries, was viewed as a place of darkness. “Galilee of the Gentiles” it was called. It was considered a backwater province. Germany was thought of in much the same way in the Holy Roman Empire: rough and rude and only partially civilized. But here it says about Galilee of the Gentiles, **“The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”** (Matt. 4:16) That light is Jesus and his gospel of forgiveness. This light appeared when Jesus appeared and called people to repent because the kingdom of heaven was near. And that light appeared in Germany and throughout Europe when people began to realize that Jesus Christ is the only real answer to God’s anger at our sin. In the midst of darkness, light.

Listen again to Luther’s definition of repentance: “Repentance is begun when we acknowledge our sins and are sincerely sorry for them; it is completed when trust in the mercy of God comes to this sorrow and hearts are converted to God and long for the forgiveness of sins.” Because of Jesus, there is a solution to sin and an answer to God’s anger. It’s found in Jesus. He bore God’s anger at sin for us

at the cross. He offered his righteous life in place of ours so that God now views us as spotless. **“In (Jesus),”** the Bible says, **“we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”** (Eph. 1:7) The prospect of this good news caused the prophet Isaiah to break into song: **“I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid.”** (Is. 12:1-2)

What an improvement this is over buying indulgences and never really knowing where you stand with God! It’s stunning to think about, but in the sacrament of penance, there was no place for faith. There was just confession and satisfaction. But faith is critical. Faith receives the saving, forgiving work that Jesus did in our place. In faith we rely on the finished work of Jesus. In faith all our anxious striving is at an end. In Christ we are forgiven. In him we have peace. **He himself is our peace.**

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” That statement in the first of the 95 Theses is a vital part of our Reformation heritage. Repentance isn’t a monetary transaction; it’s an important part of each day in our lives as Christians. We stand humbly before the mirror of God’s law, acknowledging that God is telling the truth when he convicts us of sin. But we also stand gratefully under God’s verdict of justification, knowing that for Jesus’ sake, God has acquitted us of the charges that stood against us. In Jesus we are forgiven, restored, and heaven-bound.

Martin Luther may have expressed regret later in life about his still-incomplete understanding of the gospel when he wrote the 95 Theses. But by the grace of God he was clear that at its heart what was ailing the church was not a matter of administration but a matter of doctrine. He saw that Reformation begins with repentance. By God’s grace, we’ve come to share Luther’s belief that sorrow for sin and faith in Jesus are still the life’s work of believers. Amen.

