

**+ Luke 18:9-14 + Repent: Turn to Jesus and Not to Yourself¹ +
+ Ash Wednesday + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 1 March 2017 +**

About 500 years ago, the world was turned upside down—not with a weapon of mass destruction, but with an instrument of mass instruction—a pen. A German monk named Martin Luther penned 95 theses or statements and nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. That door was basically the town bulletin board of his day. Luther penned these theses for debate among professional theologians. At the heart of his theses was the question: What does it mean to repent? Here's what Luther wrote in Theses #1: ***“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”***

Almost 500 years later, we're here on Ash Wednesday, not to debate theses, but to confess our sins. We're here not to nail words to a door, but to hear words preached from an ambo. Repentance is on our minds as another church season of Lent begins, but we see that repentance is also on Jesus' mind. Tonight, he teaches us about repentance by telling a parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray.

Picture a lamb burning on the temple altar as the sun sinks low in the sky. Can you smell the incense wafting in the breeze? As you elbow your way through the mass of humanity in the temple courts, your focus narrows to a single man in the crowd. He spends plenty of time in the temple. He is well-dressed in flowing robes. He's all business—a religious professional from head to toe. He stands up, perhaps in the middle of the crowd, so that everyone can see and hear him clearly. Then your eye catches another man off in the corner. He's a tax collector. No one would ever accuse him of being a saint. He's all alone. He's in rough shape. Now listen to their prayers.

The Pharisee has plenty to pray about. ***“God, I thank you that I'm not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get...”*** Did you hear what the Pharisee's favorite word was? Lord? Heal? Help? Forgive? No, it was that ugly, all-consuming word *I*. ***“I thank you...I'm not like other people...I fast twice a week...I give a tenth of everything I get.”***

You could say that that Pharisee was celebrating his own personal Thanksgiving Day in the temple courts! He was so thorough when it came to thanking God for himself, but he had terrible amnesia when it came to remembering any of God's blessings. Why didn't he ask for a single thing from the Lord? He already had everything he needed in himself. In fact, in his own mind, that Pharisee was everything God wanted! How lucky God was to have a guy like that Pharisee on his side! He wasn't a robber. He was a big giver! He wasn't a glutton. He was a disciplined faster! He wasn't a man of the sinful masses. No, he was spiritually above the rest! That Pharisee was doing just fine. Why bother turning to God in repentance when he could turn to himself and his own holiness for salvation?

...But don't forget about the other man in the parable—not a Pharisee, but a tax collector. Not a man full of himself, but a man running on empty. Not a man praying to be praised, but a man praying to be forgiven. Not a man bragging, but a man repenting. A man turning—not toward himself, but towards God!

In a time when most praying took place with heads lifted towards heaven, the tax collector looked down in shame. At a time when most praying took place with hands held out, this man's hands were clenched into fists that beat his chest in grief. His prayer? Short and simple: ***“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*** He knew there was nothing he could do to appease the wrath of God against his sin—praying and paying, fasting and washing could never make his sin “right” in God's eyes. That man wasn't his own solution.

He would have to turn towards another. God himself would have to appease his own wrath towards sin. That's precisely what we heard earlier from the prophet Isaiah (59:16): ***“[The Lord] saw that there was no man—he was amazed that there was no one interceding; so his own arm brought salvation, and his own righteousness supported him.”*** During Lent, we remember our Lord's work of appeasing himself through the suffering and death of his one and only Son. During Lent, Christ's great sacrifice is a yearly answer, no, the eternal answer to the tax collector's prayer!

So let me ask you this: Whom do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning? In your heart of hearts, do you identify more with the Pharisee or the tax collector? Think about it. We're heirs of Martin Luther—conservative and confessional even! I might not fast twice a week, but at least I'm not like those folks swilling

¹ This sermon was adapted with permission from the 2017 Lenten sermon series (“Repent! Turn to Jesus”) written by Pr. Aaron Christie and published by Northwestern Publishing House.

cheap beer on Fat Tuesday. You might not give a tenth of all you get, but you might actually have your offering envelope with you tonight. I know that I'm saved by grace alone, but doesn't God care that I'm doing my best? What more could he possibly want? You and I see that Pharisee far too often, don't we? Dear friends, this Ash Wednesday will you trade your comfortable security blanket of self-righteousness for the sackcloth and ashes of genuine repentance?

In the end, turning toward ourselves is sinful and nonsensical. Do you think God is really please that you are sitting in that chair right now? Isn't it true that a potato can do that? Do you think God is comparing you favorably to those drunks of Fat Tuesday or is he really comparing you with his holy self? Do you think that God is really impressed with offering envelopes or does he want 100% of your heart and life all the time? Could it be—just maybe—that God has a right to be sick and tired of us turning toward ourselves for vindication rather than turning toward him for salvation? Mercifully, the Lord rips the security blanket of self-righteousness from our sinful fingers: ***“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”***

The Pharisee thought he was God's right-hand man. He thanked God that he wasn't a robber, but in his heart, he was. Jesus once told the Pharisees: ***“Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and evil.”*** (Luke 11:39) The Pharisee fancied himself righteous, but he wasn't. Jesus said, ***“I tell you, this one (the tax collector) went down to his house justified rather than the other.”*** The Pharisee considered himself faithful and free of all adultery. Sadly, he had cheated, not on his wife, but on his God as he carried out a lifelong, passionate love affair with himself. In the end, the Pharisee's self-confidence was nothing more than a false security blanket of peace. Turning towards yourself simply serves as a detour on the road to hell—a place where the Pharisee has been humbled for the last 2,000 years.

As for the tax collector? He was humble and God exalted him. The tax collector knew his sin and God forgave him. In turning to Jesus, the tax collector was exalted! How? By Jesus' own role reversal. The Lord of heaven became the criminal on the cross. The God who fills the universe filled a tomb. The Lord of glory became the Suffering Servant so that the Father's wrath against sin could be appeased. Appeased, not by ignoring sin, but by punishing our sin in his Son. Jesus became the Chief of sinners on the cross so you and I—each a chief of sinners—could become sons and daughters of the King of kings.

Consider how Paul describes Jesus in his letter to the Philippian Christians. ***“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*** (2:5-11—NIV84). Jesus truly is the ultimate example of the humble being exalted.

Underneath the city of Rome there are caves called catacombs that go on for miles. Ancient Christians secretly worshiped in these catacombs during periods of persecution. Rome also contains what is likely the most ancient depiction of Jesus' crucifixion in the form of some anti-Christian graffiti. Scratched into the plaster wall is the picture of a man kneeling before a cross with his arms raised in worship. Hanging on the cross is the figure of a man with a donkey's head. Scratched underneath that picture are the words, ***“Alexamenos worships his God.”*** The point? Alexamenos is a fool to worship a man who was crucified! Yet humble Alexamenos is now in heaven. The One pictured with the head of a donkey by a Roman pagan now sits on a throne. The God of Alexamenos, the tax collector's God, your God has been appeased by the death of his Son in your place. So with a repentant heart, turn to him who sacrificed himself for you! With a grateful heart, receive his mercy anew every morning. With an expectant heart, look forward to Easter victory!

Luther didn't come up with something new. Jesus had taught that a Christian's entire life is a life of repentance—a lifelong turning away from ourselves and our works and a turning towards Christ and his work. It is not in the goodness of your works or the seriousness of your prayers or the zeal that you have for the Lord's work or the love and commitment you have for your family or church or country that saves you—not in the least.

The humble cross of Christ saves you! Like the tax collector in the corner, the cross doesn't look like much, but look closer. On the cross, you find the Almighty appeased. On the cross, you find a Father's forgiveness. On the cross, you find God's goodness. On the cross, you find the Lord's love, and on the cross, you find your repentant prayers answered. Dear friends, turn to Jesus. Turn only to Jesus. Turn always to Jesus. Amen.