

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness;<sup>3</sup> and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:2-3)

This is a sermon in praise of repentance. Let me begin by saying a word or two about this holy season of Advent.

You have heard of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.<sup>1</sup> Let me tell you about the pastor who stole Advent. This happened many years ago, when I was a young preacher or maybe even a seminarian. There was a local clergyman who, it seemed, did not like Advent. I did not know him, but word of what he did spread like wildfire among the young clergy. We were stunned and grieved by it. The man seems to have thought the season of Advent was gloomy, and he wasn't going to take it anymore! He put his foot down. He thought the Advent hymns were gloomy, the Bible readings gloomy, and he hated the rather Spartan liturgical appearance of Advent. He wanted Christmas trees and lights in December. Above all, he seems to have wanted Christmas carols throughout December. They play them in the stores. Why not in church? Enough of these Advent hymns!

So, he and his poor congregation stopped observing Advent and dove right into Christmas.

My theory is, this is why we have bishops. When clergy stray from the holy traditions of the church, the bishop should quietly intervene and get things back on track. And maybe that is what happened. Or maybe the congregation protested. Or maybe the pastor simply came to think better of his idea and to give it up.

I don't know him. God bless him. I've done stupid things too. But there we had it: the rumor was that, at least for a while, the pastor had stolen Advent.

Now, I use that word deliberately: stolen! For we are speaking of an injustice. Christian folk were being deprived of what was legitimately theirs. The pastor was not stealing their silver, nor their gold, but he was stealing their souls. He was fiddling with their faith. And he was disrupting the logic of the gospel. It is this last point with which I want to linger: the man was confusing the structure of the gospel.

It is no mere happenstance that all four of the holy gospels begin the story of Jesus with the story

of John the Baptist. It is no mere happenstance that Christmas is preceded by Advent. Nor is it a mere happenstance that Absolution is preceded by Repentance. These are all of a piece. It is in the very structure of love: The good news of Christmas is *so good* that it will not abandon the sinner to sin, not even for a moment, not even *this* moment, in the dwindling days of the year of our Lord 2006. God's love will not abandon us to the misery of sin, and therefore always calls us to *repentance*. The good news of Christmas speaks not only of heaven at the end of our days, but also of *these* days granted to us now. And what the Gospel of Christmas says is repent, mend your ways, for your life is so precious to God that it is worthy of repentance even now.

Let me carry on this praise of repentance by speaking of Martin Luther and his convictions about the penitential life. I begin at the very beginning: with Luther's posting of his *Ninety-Five Theses, Or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (1517). As you know, these famous theses, which launched the Lutheran Reformation, were directed against the sale of indulgences. But Luther does not begin with that subject, but with the more fundamental subject of the appropriate life for a Christian:

In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he willed *the entire life of believers* to be one of repentance. (my emphasis)

Did our Lord and Master Jesus Christ say, "Repent"? Indeed he did. Luther is quoting Matthew 4:17, where after the baptism of Jesus and his period of temptation in the desert, Jesus began to preach. And St. Matthew summarizes his preaching in this way:

From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matt. 4:17, KJV)

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<sup>1</sup> Children's book, in rhymed verse, by Dr. Seuss, 1957.

So, that was Luther at the very start of the Reformation. What about Luther as a mature Lutheran theologian? Did Luther back off from his teaching about the penitential life of a Christian? Not at all. In fact, by the time of the *Large Catechism* (1529) twelve years later, Luther had become some alarmed over the “lazy and sluggish” spirit of his followers, and of their abuse of Christian freedom, that he appended “A Brief Exhortation to Confession” to his Catechism. There are many powerful passages in his Brief Exhortation. Let me lift up one of them:

In short, we approve of no coercion [to Confession]. However, if anyone refuses to hear and heed the warning of our preaching, we shall have nothing to do with him, nor may he have any share in the Gospel. If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession, not under compulsion but rather coming and compelling us to offer it... Therefore, when I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian. (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, “A Brief Exhortation to Confession.”)

Indeed, Luther believed that parish clergy, like me, would have plenty enough to do if we would simply post the hours for Confession and urge people to come to confession.

And this leads me to share with you a quiet, confidential part of our parish life here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. And that is the practice of private confession. We do not have a confessional booth here at Immanuel, but we do practice confession and I do hear confessions.

Often the way it works is that pastoral counseling over there in my church office reaches the stage where the next natural step would be confession and absolution — not always because of troubling guilt, but also sometimes because of discouragement bordering on despair, in which the faith of the person has become so low that I sense that the person needs an authoritative declaration from God concerning the forgiveness of sins. For, you see, that is the great blessing of Confession and Absolution: It is a close application of the Gospel to individual sinners. Here in the pulpit I speak to the whole congregation, but in Confession, I speak to the individual soul before me.

And I believe that in hearing confessions, the lives and the spirits of some of our people have been lifted up and encouraged.

So, we leave my church office and come over here to this big, quiet, empty church. If it is winter, it might be cold — not bitter cold, because we always have some heat on for the sake of the organ, but cold enough that you might want to bring your coat with you. As for me, I first go into the sacristy and put on my stole — a symbol of the pastoral office — and then meet the penitent at the Communion rail where he or she kneels.

The *Lutheran Book of Worship*, our green worship book, has been in place in the Lutheran Church here in America since 1978. This means that a modern Lutheran liturgy for private confession has been in place for at least that long. And it goes pretty much as you see it on t.v. or in the movies.

If there is one within reach, why don't you take a LBW in hand and turn to the order for *Individual Confession and Forgiveness*, and let's walk our way through it a bit. It begins on page 196:

INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS, LBW  
PAGE 196FF

INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS  
(Pastor Fryer's comments inset, with left border)

*The confession made by a penitent is protected from disclosure. The pastor is obligated to respect at all times the confidential nature of a confession.*

Notice that the liturgy begins with writing in red about the confidential nature of confession. This is taken very seriously by clergy. We believe it will be a major topic of discussion with us on Judgment Day. God grant us strength that we will never betray a confession, not even under torture or drugs. This is a serious topic.

*The pastor greets the penitent. When the penitent has knelt, the pastor begins:*

P Are you prepared to make your confession?  
R I am.

I ask you a pastoral question: Why would you not make your confession? Why would you hold back? Why would you continue with a heavy heart or a guilty conscience? Oh, it is true that the Gospel promises you the forgiveness of sins, and you do not need a pastor for the Gospel promise to be true, and yet, your life might have so worked out that you are in need of what Luther called the “external word of the Gospel.” That is, it would be helpful for you to hear the word of forgiveness spoken to you by a third person — especially by a third person who has been ordained to hear confessions.

This leads me to a profound insight of Martin Luther concerning Baptism. In the early part of his career, Luther's chief theological opponents were Roman Catholic theologians, but in the second part of his career, his chief opponents were the Protestants — more radical reformers who believed that Luther was too catholic. Well, of course he was "too catholic"! He never meant to be anything else but too catholic. In fact, his complaint against the medieval Roman Catholic Church was that it was not catholic enough, since it had fallen short in the doctrine of justification by faith. Well, some of these radical reformers de-emphasized baptism, thinking it a poor external thing. Indeed it is "external," Luther replies, and that is precisely the important thing about it. Let me quote Luther on this:

*Our know-it-alls, the new spirits, assert that faith alone saves and that works and external things contribute nothing to this end. We answer: It is true, nothing that is in us does it but faith, as we shall hear later on.<sup>29</sup> but these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe — something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand. Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be Baptism in which there is sheer salvation and life, not through the water, as we have sufficiently stated, but through its incorporation with God's Word and ordinance and the joining of his name to it. (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, on Baptism)*

Likewise with *Individual Confession and Forgiveness*: It gives the penitent something real, something external to which to cling, so that the penitent does not have to wonder whether he or she has dreamed or invented a self-proclaimed absolution.

*The pastor and penitent say the psalm together.*  
O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth shall declare your praise.  
Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice,  
but you take no delight in burnt offerings.  
The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.  
Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;  
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness,  
and cleanse me from my sin. (Ps. 51:16-18, 1-2)

P You have come to make confession before God. In Christ you are free to confess before me, a pastor in his Church, the sins of which you are aware and the sins which trouble you.

From the pastor's point of view, I am glad for people to make their confessions, because sometimes I find that people are being too hard on themselves. They need the encouragement of the Bible. And so that is chiefly what I do in this part of the service. I reflect on the sin from the point of view of the Bible — both the holy law of God and the promises of forgiveness.

R I confess before God that I am guilty of many sins.

Especially I confess before you that...

*The penitent confesses those sins which are known and those which disturb or grieve him/her.*

For all this I am sorry and I pray for forgiveness. I want to do better.

This is a necessary part of confession. Your soul needs not only to confess sin, but also turn away from it. It is always appropriate for the penitent to say, "I want to do better." And if you fail during the next year, or month, or week, come back and give your confession again — yea, even seven times seventy times!

*The pastor may then engage the penitent in pastoral conversation, offering admonition and comfort from the Holy Scriptures. Then they say together:*

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;  
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with your free Spirit. (Ps. 51:1, 11-13)

*The pastor stands and faces the penitent or remains seated and turns toward the penitent.*

P Do you believe that the word of forgiveness I speak to you

comes from God himself?

R Yes, I believe.

*The pastor lays both hands on the head of the penitent.*

P God is merciful and blesses you. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

R Amen

*The penitent may pray silently in thanksgiving, or may pray together with the pastor:*

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.

He will not always accuse us,

nor will he keep his anger forever.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins,

nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,

so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.

As far as the east is from the west,

so far has he removed our sins from us.

As a father cares for his children,  
so does the Lord care for those who fear him.

(Ps. 103:8-13)

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;

as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen

P Blessed are those whose sins have been forgiven,

whose evil deeds have been forgotten.

Rejoice in the Lord, and go in peace.

*The penitent stands and may exchange the peace with the pastor.*

|| And let this be so with you: believe that your sins are lost in the sea of God's forgetfulness. Go forth with a clean heart.

The design of the gospel is to make us good people: people who are devout, cheerful, with a sweet spirit, repentant, forgiven, charitable, and a credit to the one whose name we bear, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.