In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

My sermon text this morning is from our First Lesson, Ezekiel Chapter 18. It is a lovely verse revealing the heart of our Maker. It goes this way:

32 For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.” (Ezekiel 18:32, RSV)

This verse is true. The proof is in the pudding. Our God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. If he did then there are some pretty awful people in this world the Lord would simply kill and be done with. He would unburden the world of its murderers and rapists and child molesters and cruel tyrants. And secret sins and crimes would receive their due from the One who sees all. I remember a scene in one of the Sherlock Holmes stories in which Holmes and Watson are on a train heading out into the English countryside to investigate a crime. Watson is delighted as he looks at the peaceful countryside passing by their train window. He is refreshed by the beauty and the peace of what he sees. But he notices about Sherlock Holmes that he seems troubled and depressed as he gazes at the same English countryside. Holmes then explains to Watson that he is troubled to think of the unknown crimes taking place in the cottages and the villages of the land. He believes that in the city, there are many eyes to witness crime. Victims can cry for help and people will hear and police will come running. But in the quiet countryside mean-hearted people can abuse their families and neighbors and get away with it. Well, if the Lord took pleasure in the death of people, then he could simply kill those secret sinners. But he does not do so. He bears with them, giving them time to repent. May they use that time well! He bears with us. As Jonah reminded us in last Sunday’s Bible story, the Lord is “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Jonah 4:2, RSV). And that is a great phrase there, “slow to anger.” The Lord is slow to anger. It puts me in mind of a saying of Garrison Keillor in one of his Fourth of July monologues. He said this, as best I remember it: “America is a great land, and it was not made so by angry people.” Glad to say, our Maker is “slow to anger.” Much goes on on this old earth that offends and troubles the Lord, but he is slow to anger. He is patient. He hopes for repentance and for life. The Lord wants even the worst person on the face of this earth to “turn, and live,” as we read in this morning’s text.
Our Bible texts today are about “turning.” The two sons in this morning’s Gospel story turn – one for the good, one for the bad. The first son says to his father that he will not work in the vineyard. But then, glad to say, he turns. He repents and goes and labors in the vineyard. The second son tells his father that he will obey and work in the vineyard. So far, so good. But then the lad turns, and disobeys. He does not work in the vineyard. Two cases of turning – one for the good and one for the bad.

Our Ezekiel text also speaks of turning. This is the text with which I mean to linger this morning. The Lord wants people to live. He wants each soul to repent and live. He asks each person in Israel, one by one, to turn and live. There are complexities and legitimate concerns that tempt people away from the penitential life. But the Lord would have us focus on his call to righteousness and not be distracted from his call.

Early on in our reading we encounter one of these complexities in life that can tempt people away from individual responsibility for living a good life. This complexity is contained in the saying the Lord wants no longer to hear. The Lord says this:

2“‘What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? 3As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.” (Ezekiel 18:2-3, RSV)

This saying refers to the reality that one generation can suffer because of the sins and follies of earlier generations. In the case of Israel in the days of Ezekiel, the people suffered in Babylonian captivity for more than a generation (597/587 - 538 BC). That means that there were young people born in captivity. They were captives, then, not because of their own sins, but because of the sins of earlier generations.

Such things happen all the time. Our founding fathers here in America, for example, spoke of equality. The words are majestic:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (The Declaration of Independence)

These are words that our founders lived and died by, but, sad to say, they did not apply them to the slaves they owned. Their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, along with poor slaves for generations to come, paid the price for this decision. Put more positively, our generation should take
thought of our descendents. We owe them our love. We should bear them in mind in our use of the commonwealth of the land.

So the people of Israel in Babylonian captivity complain that they are suffering because of the sins of their fathers and mothers. And no doubt this is true. One generation can suffer because of the mistakes and sins of earlier generations.

But the Lord is unwilling to let the people of Israel rest content with their complaints about previous generations. In this text, our Lord, as it were, looks directly into the eyes of each Israelite and says, “turn, and live.” You! turn and live! It brings to my mind one of my favorite sayings in the New Testament, at the end of the Gospel of John. The resurrected Jesus has told Peter that one day others would take Peter by the hand and lead him where he does not want to go. It is a prediction of Peter’s martyrdom, and naturally the man is uneasy about this prediction. So Peter raises a question about another of the disciples — about John:

... Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” (John 21:21, RSV)

But Jesus will have none of this changing of the subject. In the King James version of the Bible, there is a rhyme in the great words of Jesus to Peter.

Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me. (John 21:22, KJV)

“What is that to thee? follow thou me.” In this morning’s reading from Ezekiel, we can hear the Lord challenging the people of Israel. The Lord does not need to dispute whether the current generation of Israelites is suffering because of the sins of earlier generations. The Lord does not deny that. Rather the Lord looks into the eyes and the heart of each of his people and says, “What is that thee? Follow thou me.” Or, as we read in our text from Ezekiel, “turn, and live.” This is the Lord’s great call to individual repentance.

In general, this morning’s Bible stories deal with everyday decisions that ring with the tones of eternity. People can turn. They can turn to the good or they can turn to the bad, and in their turning they are beheld by their Maker, who has life and death in his hands. The one son can say that he will work in the vineyard, but then turn away from that work. The other son can say that he will not work, but then turn toward that good work. It matters. It matters in the prophecy of Ezekiel, and it matters in the teaching of Jesus. “Turn,” our God pleads with us, “and live.”

Have I used too strong a word to describe the attitude of our Lord? Is it excessive to say that the Lord pleads with us to turn and live? No, I think that the word fits. The Lord himself tells us why it is such an urgent matter to him
– a matter worth pleading about – that we should turn to him and live. The reason it is so important to the Lord is that he takes no pleasure, he says, in the death of anyone. There are some awful people on this earth, maybe even including us at some time in our life, but our Maker wants us to live.

And note this: the Lord wants us to live, not just in heaven, but to live now too, in these years granted to us. Jesus said that he came that we might have life, even abundant life:

I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. (John 10:10, KJV)

Such abundant life begins now, the moment we turn to Jesus or turn to him again. There is fullness of life in turning to Jesus. And we can only diminish ourselves now and in eternity by turning away from Jesus.

Each of us has complexities and legitimate concerns that can tempt us away from living the kind of life our Maker wants for us. If we want to, each of us can complain about our parents, our poor educational opportunities, our poor health, our friends who have let us down or misled us. We can complain about our times, about our leaders, about the economy, about prejudice, about many things that set us back, and every one of them true. I have no doubt, my friends, that you have suffered many blows over the course of your life. You have been held back and treated unfairly at various points in your life. But always Jesus stands before us and pleads with us, “turn to me, and live!”

Shake off the things that have held you back. Shake off even the mistakes and sins of your past. Today is a new day. Turn to me, says Jesus, and live. Live a better life starting right now. If your parents were bad, bless them, let them go in peace, and you turn to Jesus. If your schools were bad, say a prayer for the teachers and students in those schools, and you turn to Jesus. It is the tireless call of Jesus to all the baptized, and to every soul who can hear these words. Morning by morning our Maker calls to us: Put to death the old Adam and the old Eve within you and seek to rise up a new man, a new woman, to walk with Jesus this day.

The proof of how earnest the Lord is when he says that he takes no pleasure in the death of anyone... the proof is the death of his Son. Our triune God was willing that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the only begotten Son of God, should die so that anyone who believes in him should not die but have everlasting life. With his dying breath, Jesus expressed the yearning of God that none of us should die. Father, forgive!

You know, I bet, that the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation will soon be upon us. That will be about a month from now, Sunday, October 29. This great tradition of ours all began with the opening words of the Ninety-Five Theses. Luther wrote this:
When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

That is Thesis One of the Ninety-Five. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ wills that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance. Today’s Bible Lessons teach us the same thing: Let us repent day by day. It is the highest spiritual status we are likely to achieve in this earthly life: We are repentant sinners. We are people who are turning back toward God. We might be sinners, yes, but let us be repentant sinners. Let us turn to Jesus Christ and live, through his grace and merits, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever, Amen.