

Theme: A gracious God offers us liberation through repentance and forgiveness

Subject: The Prayer of Repentance

Scripture Reference: *[Jesus said] but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*

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Today we continue our Lenten exploration of prayer with the third in a series of five sermons on that topic. But before I begin, I want to give you an update on Elton, our Assistant Rector, who gave the first two sermons in this series and was originally scheduled to preached all five in series.

As most of you already know, Elton fell last Sunday evening in his apartment and suffered a broken hip. He had surgery on Monday, which went very well. He was transferred to the Renaissance Center this past Thursday, a rehab facility connected to Sibley Hospital, where he is receiving physical therapy. As broken hips go, his was a relatively simple fracture, with no displacement of the bone. Nonetheless, he will not be able to put any weight on that leg or hip for 5-6 weeks. And, as a result, we expect that he will not be able to return to us here at St. James' until after Easter sometime. Thus, in his stead, I will be undertaking the remainder of the preaching series on prayer. Our Youth Minister, Don Mullins is, in turn, taking my place coordinating the Lenten Program on prayer downstairs at this time.

The subject of that Lenten program today is *The Pattern of Prayer*. Those participating will be discussing that model prayer which we call *the Lord's Prayer*. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to begin by naming our relationship with and our dependence upon God: *Our Father*, we begin; and soon thereafter we ask, *Give us today our daily bread*. **But then, as one author has put it, the prayer begins to meddle.** It directs us to consider our own sins and to mend our relationship with others: *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,"* we pray.

I suspect that many of us forge through these words, whether we're using the word "sins," "trespasses," or "debts," without much thought as to what we're actually praying! *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."* It's a prayer of confession on our part and an exhortation to initiate forgiveness of others as well.

I suspect most of us probably find it very difficult to forgive others, particularly if we feel we've been wronged and are experiencing what we would consider to be righteous anger. But I think we also find it just as difficult to ask for forgiveness from God, as well as from others. After all, prayers of confession require that we admit that there are things that are not quite right with us and that admission can feel quite ego-defeating, a crushing blow to

our pride .

There was a man whose wife had been urging him for some time to go see their family doctor about a pain he'd been having in his stomach. "I really think you need to see about that," she said. "It could be something serious." But the man kept insisting that there was nothing wrong with him. Finally, after some time, he agreed to an appointment, just to get his wife to quit bugging him. The doctor went through a detailed check-up and sent him for a round of tests. The man insisted that it was a waste of time as there was nothing wrong with him, but he did agree to the tests.

A few days later, the doctor called and asked the man to come into his office. "I'll get right to the point," said the doctor. "The tests show that you have cancer. Fortunately, it's a kind for which we have some very good treatments. If we start right away your chances of recovery..."

But the man interrupted. "No!" he said vehemently. "I do not have cancer! There's no point in talking about treatments because there's nothing wrong with me." He got up and stormed out of the doctor's office. A year later, the man was dead.

Most of us would probably judge this man's actions and attitude to be very stupid, even suicidal. We understand not wanting to go to the doctor, and none of us likes to hear bad news. But we also know that refusing to listen to a diagnosis and the recommendation for a potentially successful course of treatment is foolhardy—it just doesn't make sense! **Yet, how many of us respond in similar ways when it comes to our spiritual health and well-being?** How many of us avoid prayers of confession and repentance? It seems that many of us have an incredibly difficult time admitting that things may not be completely right with us. And even if we do recognize what's wrong, we're often too proud to actually repent, much less take action to make amends with others we may have hurt.

In a classic Peanuts cartoon (Charles Schulz)¹, the following scene is depicted:

Frame 1: Lucy is crying bitter tears over a decision her mother has made. She wails: "You promised me a birthday party, and now you say I Can't have one. It's not fair!"

Frame 2: Enter Linus, Lucy's brother, who calls her aside to offer some advice: "You're not using the right strategy," he says. "Why not go up to Mom and say to her, 'I'm sorry, dear mother . . . I admit I've been bad, and you were right to cancel my party, but from now on I shall try and be good!'"

Frame 3: Lucy thinks about it. She even rehearses the little speech to hear what it sounds like coming from her.

Frame 4: Then she thinks about it some more.

Last panel: She cries out, "I'd rather die!"

How often are we just like Lucy? We'd rather cut off our nose to spite our face than admit we might have done something wrong and then make amends for it. **Yet this what we are**

¹As told in *Sunday Sermons*, Vol 31, No. 2 (March/April 2001) 16.

called to do as Christians. Jesus tells us to pray: *Forgive us our sins* in the Lord's Prayer. This is also the exhortation that Jesus commands in today's gospel.

As Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem, he is told of some Galileans who have been massacred by Pontius Pilate, presumably while they were offering religious sacrifices in the Temple. Those telling Jesus of this don't actually ask, "Why did this awful thing happen to these people? They must have been awful sinners." But Jesus knows they're thinking it and so he voices directly their unasked question: "*Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?*" Then he refers to another tragedy, when a tower near the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem collapsed killing eighteen people: "*Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?*" he asks. The first tragedy was an example of human evil; the second of a natural disaster.

Instead of answering the question, "why do bad things happen to good people?" Jesus moves the discussion to a different level: *No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*" Jesus challenges his hearers to recognize their own sin and their own need to repent, rather than debating about why bad things sometimes happen to innocent people. Jesus calls us to recognize that there is indeed something wrong with us – that we are sinners in need of help. So he exhorts us to repent

C.S. Lewis once said: *"We have a strange illusion that mere time cancels sin... But, mere time does nothing either to the fact or guilt of sin. The guilt is washed out not by time but by repentance and the blood of Christ."*

Though confession and repentance may sound negative and off-putting, the truth is, of course, that it is an incredibly freeing and helpful practice. It's one of those paradoxes of the spiritual life. Confession may feel like a form of death, but from it comes new life, new health. Why? Because the act of repentance allows us to remove the false face we tend to put on; repentance allows us to be honest about who we are; it allows us to **admit** that we're not perfect. And with such honesty comes great freedom, allowing us to hear God's diagnosis and treatment plan – to experience God's grace and love. In doing so, one will find great joy, freedom, and healing.

This past Thursday, I was driving during rush hour, coming down I-270 on the local lanes. A car, entering the local lanes from the left, clipped my left rear fender. There was lots of traffic and my first thought after the jolt to the car was that the driver of the other car would probably speed up and just keep going – hit and run. To my surprise, he didn't. He pulled over two lanes to get to the shoulder; I did likewise.

Once we were both able to get out of our cars, which was a trick as the traffic was very heavy, we took a look at my car. Somehow, there was no damage, which was a relief, of course. But what struck me most strongly was the other driver's attitude. He was beside himself apologizing to me for hitting my car. Practically the first words out of his mouth were, "Are you okay?" followed by several repetitions of, "I am so sorry." Then, as he turned to go back to his car, he added, "I'm going to start driving slower."

This man modeled confession, repentance, and amendment of life. It was very easy for me to forgive him. Of course, neither my car nor my person had been hurt. And yes, had either my car or myself been damaged, I probably would have found it more difficult to forgive. But even then, his attitude would have carried the day. He didn't try to excuse his driving; he didn't try to pass the blame to me as if it were my fault he'd hit my car; he truly confessed and repented. I only pray that he experienced the liberation of that repentance, driving away with a greater sense of integrity and freedom for not having been yet another "hit and run" This Lent we hear yet once again God's call to prayers of confession and repentance. This is a gift from a loving God, which allows us to be honest about ourselves, recognizing that Christianity isn't a game of "I'm OK, you're OK." Instead, we acknowledge that we come up short relative to what God created us to be and wants us to be "by what we have done, and by what we have left undone." When we do that, then we can receive treatment because we've accepted the diagnosis. And the treatment brings joyful liberation

Hymn 693 – *Just As I Am without One Plea* (35 sec/verse; 6 verses)