

Lent Midweek 1 – 2024

Repent and Believe the Good News – 2024 Theme

Repentance and Truth/Honesty

Luke 18:9-14

John 14:1-7

When I have a sore throat, I gargle with warm salt water. How many of y'all do the same? It certainly works, on some level. I don't swallow the mixture. I've never served a glass of warm salt water to anyone in my home as a form of refreshment. I'm pretty sure what the reaction would be if I did. I'm not big on lies. I'm not big on deception. I suppose that I could tell myself that it is not really salt water that I am swallowing and perhaps I could choke it down but it wouldn't be pleasant. My mouth would know the truth. Do humans deceive themselves? I've heard it said that the first deception is self-deception. The explanation to the 8th Commandment in the Small Catechism encourages us to "explain everything in the kindest way", "to put the best construction" on our neighbor's behavior. We do this to avoid hurting our neighbor's reputation. How zealous are we to protect the propriety of our own behavior? Do we regularly swallow salt water and try to convince ourselves that it is crystal clear, pure and sweet and refreshing?

I am talking about sin, you know, not salt water. Salt water might be compared to avoiding repentance, avoiding what is thought to be the pain of repentance. Are we eager to avoid the truth about our conduct, our character, our choices? Avoiding pain is natural, I suppose. Repentance often is born of pain. It's not a great feeling to know that you have soiled yourself, dishonored God's name by faithless actions, or hurt the innocent by rank selfishness. Self-delusion sometimes seems like the easier road. How much salt water are you willing to swallow in order to keep your lofty opinion of yourself intact? Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "in self-examination, the best construction is the most truthful construction." The truth; do you love it? Jesus said that He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). The truth is in you. If a man remains in me and I in him he will produce much fruit (John 15:5). Does the truth produce fruit? Is the one who swallows the salt water of hypocrisy with great regularity all that interested in producing fruit that glorifies God? I'm not sure that God is a Billy Joel fan but put these lyrics in God's mouth and see if they fit. Honesty is such a lonely word. Everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard. And mostly what I need from you.

The tax collector told the truth. The tax collector confesses the truth. I get the sense that the tax collector in the parable is in pain. He can't lift his eyes to heaven. He stands far off. He beats his breast. I also get the impression that he's done drinking salt water. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). That's pretty honest, right? What had he done? Who had he hurt? Self-delusion wasn't working for him. Is there a difference between knowing the truth and being honest? There shouldn't be. I get the sense that the Pharisee in Jesus' parable is terrified to look at himself in the cold light day. He's terrified of being seen as he really is. That Pharisee will drink gallons of salt water and tell himself how wonderful it tastes – he's trained his corrupted mind to overrule his mouth. His moral self-righteousness leads him to disdain the tax collector. His moral righteousness leads him to be blind to his condition. The Pharisees, for the most part, reject Jesus because Jesus was a revelation of grace and only sinners need grace.

You are a sinner. The truth hurts sometimes. Do you know that pain, the pain of moral failure, of feeling isolated from God because of your deliberate selfishness? That's tough, isn't it? That is a universal Christian feeling. Repentance is a universal reality in the life of believers. The truth convicts us. Honesty is recognizing the truth and refusing to call the salt water of our sin anything other than what it is. The Spirit of truth is in you (John 14:17). Christ's blood, which was shed for sinners and only for sinners, has washed you in baptism. You drink the truth – His blood which was shed for forgiveness, for sinners and only for sinners. I strongly believe that you drink it honestly. Drinking Christ's blood honestly is perhaps the most beautiful thing that a Christian can do. A congregation of tax collectors, kneeling at this altar, drinking Christ's blood honestly, and saying corporately: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." That is a beautiful thing.

Psalms 32 is priceless. "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32:1). That's you. The psalmist is proclaiming both himself and you as blessed. Not that you're sinless but that your sin is forgiven, covered. "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit is no deceit" (Psalm 32:2). David wrote this psalm. David struggled with honesty. Now comes the intimate part. Now comes David engaged in genuine self-examination and identifying the repercussions of drinking salt water. "For when I kept silent", literally when I *plowed my sin under*, when I obfuscated the truth about myself to myself, "my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long" (Psalm 32:3). Truth is inescapable. Running from the truth is exhausting; spiritually, emotionally and physically exhausting. "For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:4). There's a reason for that. There's a reason that God doesn't let you just run away into your self-deception without a Fatherly response from Him. He loves you. That's the reason. The truth sets you free. That's the reason. The crucified Christ is the way, the truth and the life and God the Father wants you in the way, to be blessed by the truth, and to have life to the full (John 10:10). That's the reason.

David then writes something that you've been through over and over. "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover up my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Psalm 32:5). You don't just say those words in the liturgy. You live those words. Truth and honesty are the fruit of repentance. You live those words because God reveals the truth to you and you embrace it. You know that the cross of Christ is your salvation. You confess and you are forgiven. You confess and you are absolved. Honesty grows through this rhythm of faith. Honesty makes you stronger. Honesty makes you merciful, because you cannot know that you've been forgiven an astronomical debt and turn around and harp on the poor sap that owes you five bucks (Matthew 18:21-35).

Christ drank our salt water. Sin upon sin upon sin upon sin upon sin was heaped upon the Lord of Glory and He drank that bitter cup. No one took His life from Him (John 10:18). He laid it down for you. Physical suffering that you can only guess at; spiritual suffering that you can never fully know; Christ's sacrifice came with a steep price. God Himself enduring all the wretched filth of human depravity in His soul. God the Son being the sole location for all evil and all death and the Father punishing it with all of His wrath. You will never know the full price that Jesus paid but you ought to think hard on it. Give thanks for that sacrifice. Thank God for that sacrifice when you lie down and when you get up. It is your redemption. Set free from

sin and death; you have been set free from sin and death (John 8:36). It came by Christ and His cross. Repent and believe the Good News (Mark 1:15).