

Quinquagesima: February 26, 2017
“The Binding Effect”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before we begin the season of Lent, we hear the announcement from Jesus in Luke 18 for what we are to make ready. We go up during Lent to Jerusalem to once again see Jesus in His deepest humiliation. We focus today on Jesus’ state of humiliation. We do so in order to learn anew that we have been bought with a price. In this way, we will see the infinite value placed on our redemption.

One of the saddest words ever spoken by Jesus are recorded in Luke 13, 5 chapters before our Gospel lesson, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”¹ These words echo the indescribably bitter sentiments concerning His people as spoken in Jeremiah. There recorded for us is God’s complainant against His people because of their impenitence. Their hardness of heart. Their lack of faith. Their refusal to turn from their sinful ways, and God says, “They refuse to return.”² We must ask, what was it that hindered them from turning to God? Can we learn from their mistakes?

A bit of context is important. Jeremiah lived shortly before, and during the first years of, the Babylonian Captivity. The Northern Kingdom had just been captured and devastated, and Jeremiah now pleads with Judah, begs with Jerusalem, to turn from their evil ways, their rebellion against God’s commands, and to repent. Stop, beg for forgiveness, and turn away from evil and do good, so that God’s judgment would not visit them, their city may not be destroyed, the Temple not be laid waste and they not be led away into captivity.

Jeremiah stands at the gate of the Temple and proclaims these words from the Lord. Our Old Testament reading is a bitter complaint that the people do not heed the warning of God’s messenger. It seemed so unreasonable that God’s people should not turn to Him. If they had not been His people, that would be

¹ Luke 13:34

² Jeremiah 8:5

understandable; but they were God's people, His children, His chosen ones. He revealed Himself to Abraham and gave them His grace, the promised Messiah, salvation of the world from sin, death, and the devil would come from the seed of this Holy Nation. Throughout the ages the voice of prophecy and revelation continued. The life and the work of the Redeemer became clearer and clearer. Over and over again, God spoke to them and gave them not only His promises, but also His warnings against the sins of the heathen nations around them. Great prophets were sent with special messages in times of danger and stress; and yet, in spite of it all, God's people were now like wild horses rushing down the road to destruction.

It all seemed so unreasonable. "When men fall, do they not rise again?"³ I mean if you fall on an icy sidewalk, the first thing you do is try and get up on your feet again. But here are God's people who have fallen on the slippery road of sin, and they make no effort to get up again. This just all seems so irrational. If you make a wrong turn on the highway, the moment you realize your mistake you will turn around and get on the right road again, that is why many have turned to GPS, right? But here are God's people who have made a wrong turn, turned away from God, but they make no effort to get back on the right road. They keep right on as before in spite of all the warning and all the pleading. God asks, "Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit; they refuse to return. I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly; no man relents of his evil, saying, 'What have I done?' Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle."⁴

Now this hurts me right in the conscience, the animals have it figured out. Verse 7, "Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord."⁵ The migratory birds know when to go South in order to escape the harshness of the winter. They know when to return North in the spring. They heed the call of their Maker in the voice of nature. Of us God says, "My people know not the rules of the Lord."⁶ "No man relents of his evil, saying, 'What have I

³ Jeremiah 8:4

⁴ Jeremiah 8:5-6

⁵ Jeremiah 8:7

⁶ Jeremiah 8:7

done?’ Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle.”⁷

Brothers and sisters in Christ, have we not the same sad picture in the Church today? Follow the gracious dealing of God with His people down through the ages. God pleads with man to turn from sin, speaks words of warning to the nations of the world, and the voice of divine judgment has resounded in all corners of the world. Think about our own communities, our own congregation. Local conditions and yet how many of God’s people are barely lukewarm! A few in earnest, and others playing around with a bit of religion, and some dead asleep in indifference. God is calling and how many of us ignore the call and go right on in the way of sin and indifference?

It all seems so strange, does it not? And we ask, “Why is it? What are the things that keep us from turning to God?” “They hold fast to deceit; they refuse to return.”⁸ That is the terrible curse of sin. While we have no ability to harden ourselves from the power of sin, we have the terrible ability to harden our hearts against the pleading voice of God.

We only have to look at one of history’s great examples: Stephen. He put forth these words in his preaching, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”⁹ This he spoke while they were putting him to death. And why was he to die? Because he was preaching the risen Christ. They knew it was the truth. Perhaps some had been at Jesus’ trial and heard Pilate testify while washing his hands. Some may have been involved in arranging the hush-money for the guards at the tomb of Jesus; and yet, in spite of it all they put Stephen to death for preaching the truth.

It is my prayer that God would take away our hardness of heart. May His Word melt the ice of our hearts. The people of Jerusalem refused to see their sin. Jeremiah minced no words and yet they still said, “What have *I* done?”

Brothers and sisters, how easily we put off our sin. How lightly and easy it is to say, “What have *I* done?” How simple to continue on the same path, or worse

⁷ Jeremiah 8:6

⁸ Jeremiah 8:5

⁹ Acts 7:51

convince ourselves they are just “little sins.” How wicked to rock our conscience to sleep with our sins and fail to see the fruits those sinful seeds spring forth. Rather than fervent love towards one another, these seeds of sin sprout anger, hatred, bitterness, pain, avarice, and resentment causing not only rifts among friends, but also caverns among God’s people. Our sin not only keeps us away from each other, it keeps us away from God!

The great vastness that sin has caused is the very reason for Jesus’ humiliation. He humiliated Himself by becoming man. He came from heaven to earth. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; all for you! We seek to run away from each other, to run away from God, and Jesus was nailed in place. He couldn’t run away; not that He would want to, He gave His life so that we would be restored to our Father. Where we seek to break with each other, He seeks to bind up. It is His life and forgiveness that we are given. It is from this life and forgiveness, that we are able to forgive one another.

There is no better place to see this unity than in the life of the church. This is by God’s great design. It is true that baptism washes an individual clean from sin, gives them the Holy Spirit, and makes them a child of God. As an added gift, this child is baptized in the body of Christ. There are brothers and sisters with one Father. We are equally yoked together not under my opinion or my power, or your opinions or your power, but united together—“One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”¹⁰

This unity continues in the way the church lives its life. Weekly we gather and confess with one voice, “I am a sinner.” We hear with one voice, “I forgive you.” We confess in word and song, and we as a body kneel to receive our food from Christ who is the head. We kneel at this altar heavy laden and we are given rest. We trudge up with our sins, kneel at the altar, and Jesus covers them with His blood poured out on the cross and into your lips.

Next time you come up to eat, notice you are not the only one eating. You eat with family. You are yoked with them and by eating here, your belief and their belief are the same. You are yoked with them under the common confession at this altar

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:5–6

and we eat the same meal, the family meal, with angels, and archangels and with all the company of heaven.

His Word and His Sacraments are unifying factors. They are the source and food of our faith. Through these very means we are given true wisdom and the sight of God. We come with hard hearts and blind in sin, and these gifts of God shatter our hard heart and bestows His grace so we hear, “Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.”¹¹ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

¹¹ Luke 18:42