

“Joy and Unity Through Repentance”

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10

10/10/2010

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our sermon text for today is from 1 Corinthians 1:10 which reads as follows: *I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*

Back in July of this year, I was a delegate at our Synod's Convention down in Houston. Before, during, and after that Convention there seemed to be one big question that was on the minds of many people: Will we ever have unity again in our beloved Missouri Synod? There has been, and still is, lots of discussion about what causes our disunity. That's good because the only way we can hope to solve it is by identifying the cause. But that's easier said than done. You see, our old, sinful nature rears its ugly head and we automatically start pointing fingers. *“There's division because you guys are too liberal in your theology.... No, it's because you guys are so radically conservative that you've lost the love of Jesus... Nice try, but you folks wouldn't know pure doctrine if it bit you in the, uh, leg... Oh really?!? Your ilk is so focused on pure doctrine that you could care less about mission work... Yeah, well our disunity is because you guys have praise bands and contemporary services... Not even! It's because you guys care more about hymnals and ancient worship services than helping people see Jesus!”* And on and on the argument goes... never addressing the real problem.

Sometimes it **appears** like we're trying to resolve it. But here too disunity and division win the day. Some folks at the Convention believed that changing the structure of the Synod would help unite us. Unfortunately, if you look at the percentages on those votes, it's clear that there was sharp division and not unity in the area of Synodical structure. A *Task Force on Harmony in the Synod* was assembled by former President Kieschnick. Ironically their final report itself caused divisions because it blamed our disunity on one group over another in the church. And then there were the elections. At first blush the overwhelming vote to elect Pastor Harrison as Synod President on the first ballot seemed like we would **finally** be united on SOMETHING. But I overheard some in that convention hall who feared that the newly elected President would conduct an inquisition to drive out all his “opponents.”

I've got news for you. President Harrison himself cannot bring unity to our Synod. I'm confident he would agree with that. In fact, in his acceptance speech he put his finger on the real problem AND the solution to our disunity in the Missouri Synod. He said, *“I wish to inform you that you have kept your perfect record of electing sinners as presidents of the Missouri Synod. I guarantee you I will sin and fail. I will fall short. I will sin against you. I wish also to say, that right now I forgive all who have in any way sinned against me or anybody else, and I plead your forgiveness for anything that I said or did that offended you... And I will work as hard as I possibly can for unity around the clear and compelling Word of God and nothing else.”*

You see, the problem with our Synod is not budgets or structure or music or conservative versus liberal. No, the problem is our inability or unwillingness to sincerely repent of our sins and ask for forgiveness. President Harrison got it right because he acknowledged that this **has** to begin with ME! My father was always fond of telling us kids to *“Sweep your own doorstep first.”* Before we start pointing out where others need to repent, we need to first look in the mirror. That includes the man standing in the pulpit right now. Convicted by God's Word,

each of us as individuals has to say to God and our fellow man, *"I repent of my sins, please forgive me. And I freely forgive anyone who has sinned against me."* That is the only way that we will ever have unity as a Synod. And can I tell you a little secret? The only way you will have joy and unity in your marriage, in your home, and in our congregation is also through sincere repentance. And it's guaranteed to work because it comes directly from God's Word!

If I were to ask you what the main messages were of Jesus' ministry, what would you say? Some would say it's God's love toward man. Others would say He called people to believe in Him as their Savior. And some would say it was the message of forgiveness through the Cross. All those are good and valid answers. However, there's probably one that you don't usually think of as a major theme in Christ's ministry. And that is Repentance! What did John the Baptist say as he prepared the people for the coming of Jesus? *"Repent!"* When Jesus began His earthly ministry what message did He preach? *"Repent!"* When Jesus sent His disciples out, St. Mark tells us they preached repentance to people. (6:12) Do you recall the 2 parables that Jesus told in Luke 15:1-10? The lost sheep and the lost coin. Both stories were about lost sinners who were restored to God's family. At the end of both of those, Jesus makes a point of saying that there is great joy in heaven when a sinner repents. And when Jesus rose from the dead he told His disciples, *"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, **and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations...**"* From beginning to end this was a major theme of Christ's ministry. Once the Holy Spirit shows us our sin and leads us to repentance, then all those other related messages of love, forgiveness, and the Cross have value and meaning to us. But God must first lead us to repentance. No repentance? No forgiveness. No forgiveness? No eternal life. And torment in hell is all that awaits those who refuse to repent.

Now if repentance is so important to God and to us, and if it's the only way that we'll ever have unity here on earth... then why do we have such a problem with it? Oh, there are a myriad of answers to that and they all have to do with our stubborn sinful nature. But allow me to highlight some of the more pernicious ones. I was reading an article about an infamous television evangelist out in Colorado who was defrocked back in 2006. He tearfully confessed that he had used illegal drugs and the services of a male prostitute. But now he's forming a new church and it seems he's had a change of heart about his previous repentance. He told the Wall Street Journal, *"I over-repented."* Huh? What kind of silliness is that?!? Hold on though. Before you start wagging your head at this guy, remember what I said before. We need to look in the mirror first and ask what kind of half-hearted repentance we are guilty of. Are we truly sincere when we come before God and say, *"I, a poor, miserable, sinner confess..."*? I'll give you the benefit of the doubt that **at the time** you were sincere. But do you sometimes go back on that repentance and say, *"I over-repented. Maybe that sin wasn't so bad after all"*? That kind of repentance isn't true repentance! I picked up a phrase from a wonderful Pastor I spoke with at the Convention and I use it a lot now. *"True Repentance **does not negotiate.**"* Neither before or after your Confession. *"True Repentance **does not negotiate.**"* Period!

Another reason why we have such a problem with repentance is sinful human pride. One person offends another person and so they respond in an unloving way. A division occurs and both sides dig in for a long battle. If your Pastor or someone else tries to help resolve the disunity, one of the first things you'll hear is, *"He {or she} started it!"* That sounds like two children fighting, doesn't it? Listen, it doesn't matter who started it. What matters is who is willing to END it! Who is willing to step forward in Christian humility and repent, asking for

forgiveness? Remember... it has to begin with ME repenting of MY sins... regardless of what the other person does!

One other major reason why we have such a problem with repentance is that we don't understand the value or importance of the Office of the Keys! Of all people, we Lutherans should get this right. It's one of the Six Chief parts of the Catechism which we study and memorize. On the one hand there are denominations which make Confession mandatory. On the other end there are denominations which have completely set it aside. As Lutherans we don't make it mandatory, but we teach the essential importance of it. Luther himself said, "*When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian.*" In other words, repentance and confession of sins should be natural for Christians... not something awkward or foreign to us. We know where to go to find relief for our sins! Your Pastor has been given the duty to hear your Confession and announce God's forgiveness both publicly and privately. Private Confession is an opportunity for you to address specific sins that are plaguing you. So why do we neglect this wonderful gift? I'm confident that Pastor Dudley will make himself available for Private Confession and Absolution whenever you need it... because repentance and forgiveness are what the Church is all about! Why not take advantage of it?!? In our text from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians he pleads for unity and an end to divisions amongst us Christians. He pleads for us to "*be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*" God wants His Church to be united in faith and doctrine... even more than we do! But that unity can only take place once we realize who we are: sinners in need of forgiveness. Through sincere repentance we are all united beneath the Cross. By His sacrificial death, Jesus has removed the guilt of our sins which was a barrier between us and God. And with that barrier removed it unites us as a body of believers. That's why Holy Communion is so precious to us. In this Sacrament, we repentant sinners are united as we receive the very Body and Blood of Jesus which was crucified for us. And as we do, we are declaring our unity of faith and doctrine... that we believe the pure, unadulterated Word of God. Fully forgiven and confessing that one true faith we have true unity!

But that's not all. Jesus says in Luke 15 that it brings great joy to God, to the angels, and to all of heaven when one sinner repents. Don't you think then that repentance should also bring joy to Christ's Church here on earth? Of course, it should! It brings joy because repentance restores unity... unity within the Church and unity with God. Christian friends, repentance and the forgiveness that flows from God is what will bring unity to our Synod... and to our homes... and to our marriages... and to our congregations. May God continue to lead us then to true repentance and may He grant us the joy and unity that His forgiveness brings. Amen!

Soli Deo Gloria!