

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
Sermon for Sunday, September 27, 2009
Rev. Daniel Burhop, Vacancy Pastor

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

We just sang the words, “In guilt we draw our infant breath and reap its fruits of woe and death.” It’s not exactly what you would find in a Congratulations-on-the-birth-of-your-child card. In fact, that didn’t come on any of the cards that we’ve received. But the words are *exactly* true. And they kind of, as you sing them, send almost a shiver down your spine.

“In guilt we draw our infant breath and reap its fruits of woe and death.” It doesn’t sound very happy or promising, like the birth of a new child should be...or holding an infant in your arms as it takes that breath, knowing that that child is full of guilt and sin. And from that very moment begins reaping the fruit of that - which is woe and death.

The words are true. We’re sinners from birth, from conception even. If you want to argue that, you can open up to Psalm 51 and talk to David. And it’s all over Scripture. We are inherently evil and sinful. From the time of that first breath, we reap the fruits of that guilty birth. From the time of that first breath, we draw closer and closer to that time of our last breath.

Now during that time, there are many sins that we commit. We can all recount them and talk about them. They’re the ones we think about on Sunday mornings during that time of silence and reflection upon our sin, that we can confess to pastors, that we confess to each other and hear that word of forgiveness. And all of those sins are indeed *sins*...but really they’re symptoms of who we really are. We’re not sinners because we sin - we sin because we’re sinners. Because we’re born sinful, the works that we do - even the good works - are tainted with sin. And sin is that much a part of our lives. As Paul writes, “The wages of sin is death.”

The start of sin is at conception, at that moment of new life. And the wages of that sin is death. That sinful nature is passed down from generation to generation. “Sin came into the world through one man,” Paul wrote, “and death through sin. And so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” That sinful nature is passed down from Adam, who fell and sinned and all the way down through every generation that sin is transferred and passed on, and we are all sinners.

Passed on through that uniting of man and woman. Luther wrote in a sermon that, “It is possible that a pure innocent birth, nature and person may be derived from a woman. But from a man - only a sinful birth, nature and person.” That’s what Luther writes in his New Year’s Day sermon, eight days after Christmas, the day that we celebrate the

circumcision of Jesus Christ. “And therefore,” Luther wrote, “circumcision was imposed upon males only, in order to signify that all birth from man is sinful and condemned.”

As we just sang earlier, “All mankind fell in Adam’s fall.” Not that we can pin the blame all back on him and say, “If he wouldn’t have done that we would be perfect,” because we all are sinful and would’ve made the same exact mistakes. “But all mankind fell in Adam’s fall. And now common sin infects us all. From one to all the curse descends and over all God’s wrath impends.”

We’re all born sinful. We’re all born unclean. That’s how we come into the world. Having established this, that we’re all born sinful - and this comes from the parents, we now turn to Jesus’ words that in our Gospel reading for today, where He says, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Jesus is certainly, here, speaking of those whose actions cause others to sin. In our daily lives, walking around, all of the things that we do, He says that is not a good thing to do - to bring doubt and despair and to cause anyone to fall into sin is not a good thing. But having established where sin actually comes from, those words strike even more clearly. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

My daughter, Hannah, three weeks old - a lot of you saw her on Tuesday night. This little, precious, little thing is a sinner. And she’s a sinner because she’s my daughter. That’s an amazing thing to think about. Jesus says, “Therefore it would be better if a great millstone were hung around my neck and I be thrown into the sea.” Because her root cause of sin is simply being born. Which is an awful thing to think about.

Jesus goes on and He talks of this, and it’s amazing. His words might seem drastic, saying it’s better to be thrown into the sea. But He goes on, and He says, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out.” It seems Jesus is being rather dramatic and radical in what He’s saying here about millstones about being tied around your neck (and millstones are these big, huge things - not a good way to go into the sea), or cutting off your hands or tearing out your eye. But in all of these things, He speaks so radically and drastically because it’s important and it’s true.

He’s speaking of repentance. He’s speaking of getting rid of our sin. And this is just as radical as what He first came into the world proclaiming in the time of His ministry, as Mark told us in the beginning, “The time is fulfilled,” Jesus said, “the kingdom of God is at hand. *Repent and believe in the Gospel.*”

Repentance is an extreme thing. It’s a complete turning around, away from sin. It is a cutting-off of all of those things that cause you to sin. It’s not a process that we get better at over time. It’s not a New Year’s Day resolution that you hope to fulfill and when you stumble you just say, “Well I’ll change that resolution a little bit so I can still

justify myself and say I've fulfilled it." It's not that at all. It's a complete and quick removal of your sin. It's an amputation. It's a circumcision.

"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye," Jesus says, "than with two eyes to be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."

The message Jesus is telling His disciples and all of those around Him - us, as well - is simple: *Get rid of your sin*. Get rid of those things that cause you to sin. But we can't do that. For the very thing that you need to remove is the same thing that takes away your power to remove it. Your sinfulness causes you to be unable to get rid of your sin, because it's that much a part of you. It's yours from conception. That's how you were born, that is what your nature is. Jesus is asking the impossible of us. To say, cut it off and get rid of it, remove it and just be good people - it is impossible. It's impossible for us.

But because you cannot remove it, God does an even more radical and drastic thing. He removes it for you. And He does it by placing it on His Son and cutting His Son off from His love. Isaiah prophesied, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned, everyone, to his own way. And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He, (Jesus) was oppressed. He was afflicted. Yet He opened not His mouth, like a lamb that is led to slaughter, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. By oppression and judgement He was taken away. And as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?"

The one that is cut off is not your hand or your eye or your foot. It's Jesus. He is the One that's cut off from the land of the living. And as Isaiah prophesied, "Who in His generation even considered that this was what was happening?" That He was being stricken - not because of who He was, but because of all of us. Because of all of our sins.

That's the radical, amazing thing of God. All of your sin, all of your iniquity was laid upon the One who was perfect and knew no sin. The One who was not born of a human father, but conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Of the Father's love He was begotten and then He was cut off from that Father's love on the Cross, where He calls out, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?"

"As by one man all mankind fell," we sang. "And born in sin was doomed to hell, so by one man who took our place we all are justified by grace." Being united to Christ and His life and His death, being buried in the waters of Baptism, you've been buried with Christ into death. Your sin has been cut off and removed and you have new life.

Hannah, my little, cute, precious daughter is, sadly, born to an incredibly sinful father. And she's born with that same sinful nature that I have and that my dad has and his dad and all the way back to Adam. But she has a far greater father in God the Father. And being begotten of Him, being born from above in the waters of Baptism, she is seen as perfect and as sinless as Jesus Christ.

Her sinful nature and all of her sins have been removed, placed upon Jesus. She's baptized into that name of the One who was begotten of the Father's love. And so have all of you.

You see, being drowned in the sea is not such a bad thing. In fact, as Jesus says, "It is better for us to be drowned in that sea," ...if the sea you're being drowned in is the waters of Baptism. You've been baptized into that same name, into that same water that Hannah will be baptized into, and that all generations that come from us that have that inherent sinful nature will be baptized into. And all are seen as perfect. You have that gift, it's not something that just happens as a fun rite for a new child. It's something that infects your entire life.

In a moment we're going to sing a hymn that has the verse, "O Christian, firmly hold this gift and give God thanks forever. It gives you the power to uplift in all that you endeavor. And when nothing else revives your soul, your baptism stands and makes you whole. And then in death completes you." Your Baptism is not just a one time thing or something that happened to you long ago that you can't even remember. It's something that makes you who you are today. You *are* baptized. And in your death that Baptism completes you as you inherit that eternal life that God has already given to you by declaring you His son.

Your Baptism is not simply a starting point. It's an ending point as well. And it fills up your whole life in between. And it fills up your whole eternal life that is to come. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life."

And that's what gives us peace. *That's* what assures us that we have salvation while we know how sinful we are, while we can't even recount all of the sins that we do. And even if we could, we'd still have that sinful nature within us. We have that forgiveness because of the One who came and took all of that upon Himself and was cut off in our place. And then raised from the grave, just as you are raised from the waters of baptism. He has new life and He gives that new life, that promise of resurrection, to you.

Now may this peace of God that surpasses all of our understanding, may it guard, may it keep us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.