



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Holy Thursday**

**March 24, 2016**

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### **“With Repentant Joy”**

*(Luke 15:20-24)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him . . . And the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate” (Lk. 15:20-24).*

**COLLECT:** O Lord, in this wondrous Sacrament you have left us a remembrance of Your passion. Grant that we may so receive the sacred mystery of Your body and blood that the fruits of Your redemption may continually be manifest in us; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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In the Communion Liturgy, more specifically in the Prayer of Thanksgiving, we say this: “Blessed are You, Lord of heaven and earth, for You have had mercy on those whom You created and sent Your only-begotten Son into our flesh to bear our sin and be our Savior. *With repentant joy* we receive the salvation accomplished for us by the all-availing sacrifice of His body and His blood on the cross” (LSB, 178).

*With repentant joy . . .* Have those words ever really grabbed you? Have you noticed the inherent conflict in that phrase? “What’s joyful about repentance?” What kind of person gets joy out of turning away from temptation and sin and asking for forgiveness?

I am one who has to repent a lot. Because of who I am as a person, as a husband, a father, a friend, a competitor, a pastor. I have to repent and apologize to a lot of people a lot of the time. And by gum, I don’t find it to be a very joyful business. But I’ll try to do it well. There’s a right way and a wrong way to do just about anything, and I’ll try to repent and confess my sin in the right ways. I’ll look a person right in the eye and say, “I’m so sorry” for forgetting this, or for saying that, or for hurting you in this way. It’ll be in person, not by email or text, without making excuses, without shifting the blame. I won’t say, “I’m so sorry if I offended you.” I’ll say, I’m so sorry *that* I offended you.” I’ll try to be specific, to acknowledge the hurt, express sorrow for it too. And I don’t find that to be much fun. What are the old expressions? “Tucking in your tail.” “Drawing in your horns.” “Eating humble pie.” “Getting

knocked off your horse.”

I’m eternally grateful that Gail knows how to forgive me. I’m also grateful that you know how to forgive me. But we’ve all experienced it going the other way, right? We humbly apologize, and what we get back in return is not anything that looks like genuine forgiveness. At best, the person will change the topic, leaving you hanging there. At worse the person will carry on by telling you in more specific detail how egregious your behavior was.

So on first glance, those two words “repentant joy” seem to be mutually exclusive. You’re repentant *or* you’re joyful, but there’s no joy in repenting. It seems to be another oxymoron like “genuine imitation” or “working vacation” or “temporary tax increase.”

“With repentant joy. . .” I’ve noticed that phrase and it’s dissonance for some time, but I didn’t have an “aha moment” until the Parable of the Prodigal Son came up in the readings a number of weeks ago.

You know the story. (Anyone who comes for worship on Holy Thursday also knows the Parable of the Prodigal Son.) When that brat of a son realizes he has nothing and finds himself destitute and drooling over the pigs’ silage, when he has nowhere else to turn he turns for home and starts conjuring up a speech designed to manipulate his father into taking him back.

Verse 20, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” I love the fact that the son launches into his well-rehearsed speech, but isn’t able to get through it because the father is already giving orders to his servants. “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate!”

This would not be the response of most human fathers. In my head I have a picture of how a well-to-do, land-owning father with servants might respond. First, if he was even looking for his son, he wouldn’t have run off to

greet him. That's not what a proud, distinguished, insulted and angry father would do. No, he would have walked back to the house and retreated to his study and closed the door. That's *his* room in the house where he conducts important business. There the walls are covered with a beautiful mellow mahogany. There's a fire crackling quietly in the fire place. There's an antique mantle clock that has a soothing beat to it and Westminster chimes. He sits in his plush, leather office chair and pulls out his ledger and starts working the numbers. Ten minutes later a servant quietly knocks on the door. "Sir, your youngest has returned and wishes to speak with you." "Very well . . . give me fifteen minutes to finish this and then show him in." The son sits anxiously outside the study. Fifteen minutes later the servant knocks again lightly and opens the door. The father doesn't look up but is still calculating numbers in the ledger. The son doesn't dare invite himself to a seat, but stands holding his cap in his hands, anxious and silent. When his father finally looks up he launches nervously into his speech, hands trembling, eyes welling up, throat constricting. The father says nothing, only leans back in his chair with his hands behind his head.

Friends, this is *not* the kind of Father you and I have. This is not the kind of soul sucking response that our Father has for our repentance. In the parable, Jesus has revealed the kind of Father we have. He is the one who has been watching for our return, hoping for it. He is the one who, while we were still a long way off, saw us, and was filled with compassion. He is the one who runs down the lane as fast as his old legs will carry him and throws his arms around us and kisses us. He is the one who doesn't even allow us time to get our speech out. He knows we're repentant, has heard enough of that, and is already giving orders to his servants. "Quick, my best robe, a ring, sandals, fattened calf! Let's have a feast and celebrate!" *That's* the Father we have.

In this same chapter Jesus said, "There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who

repents.” In stark contrast to the attitude of the Pharisees in Scripture, in stark contrast to our own begrudging forgiveness, we have a Father who loves to forgive. We have a Father who celebrates our repentance. When we think of *him*, maybe the phrase, “repentant joy” makes a little more sense. This Father enables us to repent with joy, *because we know who we’re coming home to*. This Father isn’t going to drag us out to the wood shed to give us our lashings. No, we’re coming home to a Father who so loves us that he celebrates it when we return to our senses and head for home. We’re coming home to a Father who, in front of everyone else, receives and restores us as his heir, not as a slave.

You’re here on Maundy Thursday, so you’ll remember David’s story too, and Bathsheba, and poor Uriah. And you’ll remember how Nathan confronted King David with an account about a rich man who demanded a poor man’s pet lamb for dinner. And you’ll remember how enraged King David became at this injustice in his kingdom. He demanded to know who it was that did this wicked thing. “You are the man!” Nathan says, sticking the sword of the Lord’s law right into his abdomen. David, caught in his sin, finally comes out with it, with true repentance. “I have sinned against the Lord.”

The very next words from Nathan are *not*, “You bet your life you have.” And they are not, “Not only against the Lord, but also against Bathsheba, Joab, Uriah, and everyone else in your kingdom that you’ve been lying to.” No. Nathan takes no pleasure in giving that sword a little twist for good measure, because he knows the Lord takes no pleasure in that either. Instead, it goes like this: David says, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And Nathan said, “The Lord has taken away your sin.”

That’s the kind of Father we return to, one who loves to forgive. When he sees true repentance, he doesn’t delay his forgiveness. He gets no pleasure seeing us wallow around in humiliation a while longer and for good measure. No, he loves to have mercy.

Little wonder it was David who wrote such beautiful psalms about repentance and the Lord's forgiveness. "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away." That's what happens when we refuse to repent and confess. It eats away at us on the inside. David continues, "But when I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not cover my iniquity . . . you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Blessed [happy] is the one whose transgression is forgiven" (Ps. 32). That's repentant joy.

It's the joy of that woman who broke the alabaster jar full of precious perfume and poured it over his feet, for she had been forgiven much.

It's the joy of the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, who when he felt the mercy and love of God even for sinners such as him, he says, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Notice, he's a work in progress, right? "*If* I have cheated anybody. . .?" Come on, Zacchaeus, don't hedge here. Don't be squeamish! (We are all works in progress.)

It's the joy of Peter who had betrayed Jesus so blatantly. Yet when he recognizes the risen Jesus on the shore, he shouts "It's the Lord!" And he just couldn't wait for that slow boat to turn around and make its way to the shore. No. He jumps overboard and heads for shore with a great deal of splashing and spluttering. *He* knew who he was coming home to.

It's the joy of Paul, who had been a fierce persecutor of Christians, until the Lord persuaded him otherwise. Paul suffered a lot for the sake of the Gospel. "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked . . ." It's quite a litany, yet he also writes, "In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds" (2 Cor. 7:4).

Repentant joy. Especially on Holy Thursday, we know God intends that joy to be ours. *Remember who you're coming home to!* Repentant joy at the Lord's Table, because the Lord has said, "Come now, let us reason together: though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as

white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Is. 1:18).

Repentant joy here, because the Lord has promised, “As far as the east is from the west, so far will he remove your transgressions from you.”

Repentant joy here because the Lord has invited us to “Taste and see that the Lord is good” and also, “I will remember your sins no more.”

Repentant joy here, because it’s not for the shellacking we deserve. No! It’s for the cup of salvation.

Repentant joy, because, along with the prodigal son, we are receiving here the best food in the Father’s house, the most costly to give, but also what we need the most.

Repentant joy. Amen.

