

"Changed Lives"

1 Peter 1:17-25

April 30, 2017

3rd Sunday of Easter

We are once again experiencing a cheerful, positive, uplifting election in the state of Montana. Ok, after looking at the television ads for both candidates, the best we can say is that we are experiencing an election. There are at least two things you can count on in any election, it seems. Despite the constant cry to do away with them, you will always have attack ads. And, no matter what any incumbent has accomplished in their term of office – even if they have brought about world peace, discovered a cure for cancer, and balanced the federal budget – there will always be a cry for change. We want to “drain the swamp”, kick the bums out of office, lower taxes, and so on. Even though such change rarely happens, it remains an appealing concept.

Many (if not all) of us would like to see some sort of change in our own lives. It may be financial change. It may be social change. In light of our dangerous and depressing times, we'd like to see spiritual change. As we celebrate the Easter season, we continue to hear in our Scripture readings of how the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead brought about great change in the lives of those who experienced it. The disciples changed from cowering wimps who had been driven into hiding (last week's Gospel) to bold proclaimers of Jesus Christ (this week's first reading). In our Gospel reading for today, we see two faithless and discouraged disciples slowly trudging to Emmaus changed by the resurrection of Jesus to strong believers and faithful witnesses who sprinted seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell the Good News.

What about us? We may be Lutherans and the joke is that we don't like change. But can there be change for us – good, solid, helpful spiritual change that will renew us in our faith and revitalize us in our lives? St. Peter is writing to people who are very much like us. They live in a world and a culture which are very much hostile to the Christian faith. Nevertheless, they have believed in Jesus even though they have never seen Him. They desire good, solid, and helpful spiritual change to help them as they hold on to their faith and attempt to serve the Lord in a hostile world. Peter writes to them and to us of such a change for us in our epistle reading for today.

The first change that must occur is our attitude about ourselves. Many people, including some self-professed Christians, think very highly of themselves. That's easy to do. We live in a world in which morality has been watered down and everything is either okay or relative. For the past fifty years, people have grown up being told how wonderful they are and how nobody should ever judge them. Anything that even seems negative and might be considered wrong is excused with the words “Nobody is perfect” or “I'm only human.” It's no wonder that people have no time for God. They don't need Him most of the time and, when they DO need something, they'll shoot up a quick prayer and expect God to do what they want to make them happy.

This is what has been labeled “moral therapeutic deism.” We expect God to leave us alone (deism) when we are busy doing other things. We believe His job is to be therapeutic – that is, to make us happy. He should expect and require nothing of us except to be moral – that is, basically nice.

Peter calls for that attitude to be changed. He writes, “if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” Calling on God as Father is not to regard Him as our good buddy or as a genie to grant us wishes, but as our Judge. As a holy God, He judges our deeds (as well as our thoughts and words) by His standard of holiness. Therefore, we should live with fear during our time of sojourn here on earth for none of us is holy. All of us have sinned and fallen short.

How does our attitude get changed from thinking we are wonderful and good enough to get by? It is by hearing the Law of God in all of its harshness and brutal honesty and not trying to soften it or water it down as many churches have done. Like taking a bitter tasting pill in order to gain healing, hearing God's Law, as bitter and difficult as it is, drives us to repentance where we see our sin and humbly seek God's mercy

That leads to a second change – a necessary change - our status before God. As long as we remain arrogant by denying that we have sin or that our sin is not all that serious since we are basically good people, we remain separated from God. And God is not a judge in name only. He is a Judge who must and will punish sin and those who commit it. This punishment is not a “time out”. or some other slap on the wrist. It is serious and eternal punishment in hell which is something that even some Christians and others who wish to remake God in their own image as a non-judgmental softie and wish to view God’s Law as the Ten Suggestions, seek to ignore or deny.

The only way to change our status before God is to get rid of the sin and become perfect again. There is no way, no matter how hard we try, for any of us to even get close to that. It’s as if we were kidnapped and held for a ransom of \$1,000,000. Empty out your checkbook, withdraw your savings, and max out your credit cards and you won’t even be close.

Peter reminds us though that Someone has already paid the ransom for us. He writes, “Know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers.” Ignorance of sin or our denial of it leads to “futile ways” or, as one commentator put it “to a dead end” no matter how appealing the sin might be or how many people are doing it and calling it good. It doesn’t lead to a better life. It leads to no life – only death in hell.

But Jesus has paid the ransom price which sin demanded and which we could not pay. Peter writes that the ransom has been paid, “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” The price was so high that anything perishable like silver, gold, or (today) money – even if it was all the silver in the world, all the gold in the world, and all the money in the world. – could not pay for a single sin. But the precious blood of Christ, offered like a sacrificial lamb without blemish or spot, is sufficient to pay the ransom for the sin of the world – for your sin and my sin.

On Good Friday, the divine check to pay for the sin of the world was written in the blood of Jesus. Forgiveness and eternal life were purchased for you and me. On Easter, that divine check was cashed. Forgiveness and eternal life were distributed to you and me. We were brought back to the presence of God, fully forgiven, never to be separated again. Jesus did all of this, Peter writes, “for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”

That leads to one final and important change, a change we don’t emphasize often enough, a change we may ignore or view as optional as far as our faith life goes, and that is a change in life. Since we have been saved entirely by the grace of God without us having to do anything, we come to believe that there is nothing we ever have to do. That is not true. We have not been saved just from something – from sin, from death, from the power of the devil, but we have been saved for something – for an entirely new life.

Peter says we have been purified “by your obedience to the truth.” The translation here is poor. There is no “your” in the Greek text. We have certainly been purified by obedience to the truth but whose? Certainly, not by our imperfect obedience. We have been made pure Christ’s perfect obedience to the truth. He obeyed the Law of God perfectly – resisting all the evil which we so often do and doing all the good which we so often ignore. He has purified us from sin because of the precious blood of Christ. He has purified us for holy living because of the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Jesus rose from the dead, Peter says, so that “your faith and hope are in God” for the future life. That’s taken care of. But, also, as Jesus rose from the dead to live new now, so we have we been raised from the death of sin and born again to live a new life now in which we not only love God but we have, what Peter calls, “a sincere brotherly love.” He says, “love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again through the living and abiding word of God.”

We love each other sincerely and not for show or to gain praise. We love each other earnestly and not just when it’s easy or when our brother or sister is lovable. We love both in what we say and in what we do. As John wrote in his first epistle, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” (1 John 3:18) This love is empowered by the resurrection of Jesus

Christ from the dead and enabled by the imperishable Word of the Lord – the Good News which we have heard, believed, and now live.

Change is more than a catchy political slogan. Change is the message of the Word of God. We change from a self-righteous view of ourselves as pretty good people to one of ourselves as poor miserable sinners through the harsh and necessary preaching of the Law of God. We change from sinners separated from God and doomed to hell through the ransom paid for us by the precious blood of Christ. We change from lovers and servers of self to lovers and servers of our neighbors through the new life we have by Jesus' new life in His resurrection from the dead. Change is not frightening. Change is not optional. Change is a good thing, a gift of God for our salvation and for our neighbor's good. So embrace the change God works out in you and use it for His glory and in service to your neighbor. Amen.