

"The Question That Too Few Ask"

Jeremiah 8:4-7

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Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Emmett, Idaho

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Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Baptized,

The Word of the LORD came to the young prophet and it was the Word that Jeremiah was to speak as he stood at the entrance to the House of the LORD. Jeremiah was to tell God's Word to the impenitent people who were entering into the Temple. These fallen offspring of Adam, even though called to be sons of God, continued to go through the external motions of the service in the Temple while in the state of unbelief. Part of what the LORD told them through the prophet Jeremiah is scathing Law.

"Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this House, which is called by My Name, and say, 'We are delivered!' - only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this House, which is called by My Name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the LORD."

This saying did Jeremiah speak to those to whom he had been called by God ... a servant of the Word to deliver the Word of the LORD. In other words, "O my brothers and sisters according to the flesh, how far you have fallen! O you impenitent people, only in your dreams has this House of God become a place of your deliverance. So thick is the rust on your recalcitrant hearts that the question does not enter. So fogged are your unbelieving minds that the question is not thought of. So scaly are your blinded eyes that envisioning the question is out of the question. Thus, your mouths are incapable of even asking the question."

What question is that? Well, it is part of the Old Testament Reading for the Second to the Last Sunday of the Church year and it's ...

... The Question That Too Few Ask

Jeremiah 8:4-7 - "You shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD: "When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return. I have given heed and listened but they have not spoke aright; no man repents of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?' Each one turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle. 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 ordinance of the LORD.'""

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Part 1. The unasked question: "What have I done?"

Part one of the sermon addresses the unasked question, "What have I done?", and this question was not uttered in repentance by the people of Jeremiah's day. The reason was that the people to whom the Word was being directed did not care about the Living God, or about God's Word of Law and Gospel, or about what was right and wrong. They were willing to know and have and kowtow to other gods. The people to whom the promise that the Messiah was to be given, and from whom the Messiah was to be born, didn't bother to ask themselves, "Is what I am doing right or wrong? Is this a sin? Is that a sin?" They didn't care. They became a courageous congregation whose individual members continue to depart from the truth and as a result, "each one turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle."

But this is a course that has departed from the Way of Life and it is a path plunging into a battlefield of death. They have taken to the worship of other gods and now engage in syncretism, that is, an activity whereby other gods are acknowledged, invoked and/or worshiped. Such a man might burn a bit of incense to Baal, worship this god for a while and that god for a bit, and then, at his leisure, stride on into the House of the LORD in the imagined fulfillment of a sort of spiritual insurance policy, doing so as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Indeed, so far have these people gone fallen from the truth that they are incapable of being convicted by God's Law. "They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return. I have given heed and listened but they have not spoke aright; no man repents of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?'"

Part 2. The question asked on the morning after: "What have I done?"

So we come to the second part of the sermon, for it came to pass that one day ... and it is only by the mercy of God that the day comes ... one day you realize what has happened. It is the morning after and you finally wake up to what you have done. Whether it was physical adultery with some other person or spiritual adultery with some other god, you finally ask yourself, "What have I done?" Or, you have neglected your family for the sake of personal gain at work, or you have been abusing your spouse, or you have been enabling your children and grandchildren to stay away from the LORD and His Church, or you have been cheating at school, or you betrayed someone who trusted you, or you have not walked together with your brothers, and you finally ask, "What have I done?" Maybe you were causing problems in a congregation, or perhaps you were using excuse after excuse to keep from serving the LORD in His Church. Whatever it was, and the transgressions are legion, you wake up the morning after and ask yourself, "What have I done?"

Do you realize what you have done in asking the question, "What have I done?"? You have recognized that there is a standard that you have not achieved. It is the Law of God and you have broken it and you are the guilty party. You did this and you didn't do that. You said this and you didn't say that. You thought this and you didn't think that. To compound your sin, you had not, that is, until this particular morning after, ... you had not admitted that it even was a sin. You have transgressed the LORD God Almighty's Commandments and you have sinned against Him. Then, because of the Holy Spirit's work by means of the Law granting you a guilty conscience and the realization of the consequences of your sin, which can be quite terrible, you recognize your utter failure and you finally acknowledge your sin.

Thus does the soul that has sinned look to the LORD God and cry out for deliverance. And what is the LORD's reply? Well certainly, and first of all, He is not angry with those who look to Him and ask, "What have I done?" The sermon text informs us of that. Part of the LORD's criticism with the people of Jeremiah's day was declared when God said that these people "hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return. I have given heed and listened but they have not spoke aright; no man repents of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?' Each one turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle." So the person who asks the question is being put into a position where the Law is doing its job of accusing the old Adam; and as such into a posture where the Good News of God's forgiveness may be announced.

3. The LORD's Answer to "What have I done?"

Third, consider what the LORD's answer is to the penitent's query, "What have I done?" When the child of God repents; that is, confesses his sin and looks to the LORD for forgiveness, what is the LORD's reply? The reply is in the Word of God and it is Good News.

"Yes, this is what you have done but behold, dearly beloved; I want you to listen to what I have done! I have given you My Word and promised the Savior. 'I AM your Shield, your exceedingly great reward' (Gen. 15:1) and this is in spite of what you have done and this is not because of anything that you could do. Your hope is because of what I have done and what I will do. Even though you have sinned greatly and grievously, 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine (Isaiah 43:1). Though you have been in bondage and, because of your many transgressions, deserve to die in the fetters that are linked from the prison in this world to hell in eternity; behold, I AM the perfect Passover Lamb Whose death has given you Life, Whose Body is food for your soul, and Whose shed Blood stained the wooden portal and covered you in the household of the faithful. Fear not, for the Lamb Who was slain lives and you may join Job in confessing the truth of the Resurrection ... that you know that your Redeemer lives. Indeed, 'Worthy is the Lamb Who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing' (Rev. 5:12)."

You, who once followed the natural inclinations of your sinful heart and the ways of the world, are sons of God the Father, and through His Son, you have a re-created heart and the LORD dwells within you. It is no longer you who lives but the Redeemer Who dwells with and you are a temple of the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? Well, consider a couple examples that take place every day in this world.

Sometimes, as people walk about, they fall down. What do they do then? They get up. When someone goes out the door to go to the store or even to war, it is with the intention of returning to the house. So also for the LORD's people in the Church ... they stumble and stand ... they walk out and return. What happens when they don't do this? Listen to a portion of the text once more: "When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return. I have given heed and listened but they have not spoke aright; no man repents of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?' Each one turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle."

The child of God, though he stumbles daily in his old sinful nature and falls to sin, yet through holy Baptism will he, "by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts

and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (Small Catechism). Where is this written? St. Paul writes, Romans, chapter sixth: We are buried with Christ by Baptism into death, that, like as He (Christ) was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

The child of God, though he walks out of the House of the LORD having heard the Benediction and into the world where the inevitable happens sooner rather than later, will he not return to the House ... that is, will he not repent and make confession? Certainly, for "confession embraces two parts. One is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven" (Small Catechism).

This Good News ought to produce in us a habitual hunger and a recurring thirst that draws us back each week to the Feast of Victory from our God. This longing is similar to the way that migratory birds return each year. But all too often, even with those who claim to be the children of God, this does not happen. Or, as it is written, "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 ordinance of the LORD."

"But what shall a person do if he be not sensible of such trouble and feel no hunger and thirst for the Sacrament? To such a person no better advice can be given than that, in the first place, he put his hand into his bosom, and feel whether he still have flesh and blood, and that he by all means believe what the Scriptures say of it. Secondly, that he look around to see whether he is still in the world, and keep in mind that there will be no lack of sin and trouble, as the Scriptures say. Thirdly, he will certainly have the devil also about him, who with his lying and murdering, day and night, will let him have no peace within or without" (Small Catechism).

So the LORD waits to hear the question that too few ask. His called servants of the Word wait as well. This waiting is for those who ask the question, "What have I done?", to ask it and return to this Holy House. Thus, when these penitent enter the gracious Presence of the LORD, they hear the Word of Good News ... that they have eternal life and salvation and forgiveness in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.