

Times of Refreshing

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and the Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.

The text for our message today is the first lesson from the book of Acts, especially these words: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you-- even Jesus.” This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ,

There aren't many experiences that are truly universal, but I'll bet I can think of one. I'll bet that everyone here has played baseball at least once. And I'll bet that everyone here has struck out. I can remember striking out with the bases loaded and two outs in a close game. You just hope nobody speaks to you afterward.

You know the feeling. You've waited in the lineup for a long time to get a turn at bat. Now you step into the batter's box in front of all those people, imagining yourself plastering that ball out to the fence. You get set, look toward the pitcher and... bam! The ball snaps into the catcher's mitt and the umpire calls, “Strike one!”

That was bad! How could you have let that ball go by? You straighten up and wiggle the bat. You swing it over the plate once, right where the ball should be, and you get set again. This time you're ready as the pitcher winds up and throws. This time you're not letting that ball get by... oh, no! You *swing* at a pitch way out of the strike zone. You swing so hard it makes you step forward out of the box. Boy aren't you foolish?

And now you're in trouble, too, because the count is 0 and 2. Your teammates are not looking very confident. Your coach is yelling something to you. Your parents are sitting in the stands looking concerned and a little sheepish. You've got just one more chance and now you've got to do everything right! You watch the pitcher throw. Can't swing at a bad one, now. Is it too high? A little outside? You hesitate for a split second and *too late*. The bat is still on your shoulder as the umpire calls, “Strike 3!” This feeling of failure is one of the worst feelings in the world. Does it bring back any memories for you? They can tell you that Hank Aaron has the record for striking out, or something like that, but realizing you've let others down like that is rotten.

And even if you are the rare exception in this room who has never played ball and struck out you still know this feeling of failure and guilt from other situations. Maybe one of these scenarios rings a bell: Your father asks you, “Didn't I tell you not to do this?” after you broke something. I can remember snapping the wooden tongue off a wagon by turning too short with the tractor about a half hour after my father told me, “Don't turn too short with the tractor or you'll snap the tongue off.” “Didn't I tell you not to do that?” he asked me. “Yes.” “Then why did you do it?” “I don't know.” Or your mother lectures you, “I thought you knew better than to do that.” Or your spouse says, for what seems the hundredth time, “Honey, didn't you promise me? Haven't we

been over this before?” Or “I thought you were going to take care of this,” says your boss, “Weren’t you at the meeting? Wasn’t this your responsibility?” And it feels like every word is dropping another load of bricks on your back.

If you know that feeling that you must know what these people in the crowd were feeling like when Peter got to the part of his speech where he spoke the theme verse for today, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you-- even Jesus,” because right up to this point he has been laying it on them about what failures they were, and where they had messed up. The crowd hadn’t come for that speech, but here they got it. What happened was that Peter, with John alongside him, had healed a man who for years had been sitting lame at a temple gate begging, and whom most everyone knew. He had been lame since birth. Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Then that man got up and began leaping and jumping and praising God, and of course a huge crowd gathered around to see the spectacle and to hear what Peter would say about the miraculous event. Our text is a sermon or a proclamation of Peter on this occasion, and a sermon God used (along with the miracle) to bring about 2,000 people or the population, roughly, of Auburn, to faith in that one day.

And what does Peter tell them in this very successful sermon? First he connects this miracle with the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose power, active in this world, healed that man. Second, he hits them hard with the law. He says, “Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer [namely Barabbas] be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.” God finally sent the answer to all our prayers, and you killed him! You handed him over to be killed (strike 1!) You disowned the Holy and Righteous One (strike 2!) You killed the author of life (strike 3!). The amazing thing to me is that nobody said, “No, it wasn’t really me, you see I was just watching, or in bed, and it was other people shouting out for him to be killed. I was just minding my own business. It’s unfair for you to try to blame me.” I’d think that today someone would try to answer that way. I might have. But these people realize that the blame is theirs, too, because they didn’t do anything to stop it. They made some very bad choices in terms of not standing up for what was right, and of not acting with courage. They let the events happen by not doing what needed to be done when they had the choice.

And so have we. How many times have we made choices in life that said, “Not Jesus, but Barabbas. I like to side with the sinners!”? How many times have we disowned the Lord by what we didn’t say, and let our culture in our society slide downhill while we do nothing about it? How have our sins caused the suffering and death of Christ? If Peter’s words condemned the people in that crowd, not all of whom had a direct part in Jesus’ death, as being nevertheless guilty of it, then it condemns us, too.

Of course, the clincher was when Peter said, "You killed the author of life." I can just imagine a collective hush sinking over the crowd at that point. It would be as if a plague were killing the people of our county, and you just killed the only doctor who could help the people. If this Jesus could heal this man; if it is true that he rose from the dead; if it is true that he is the author of all life, then we did nothing to stop his murder. We were part of the deed.

But you know, you cannot kill the source of life itself, unless he allows it. No more than you could dry up an open fire hydrant with a towel or darken the sun could you ever kill the source of all life, except that Jesus willingly died for your sins, and that's the point Peter wants to get to. He says that this was God's plan all along that the Christ should suffer for us. So now, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you-- even Jesus." Peter's looking for two things, two actions from us, which will have glorious results.

First, he says "Repent, then." I like that "then." It means, "This is only a logical conclusion which I shouldn't have to argue. Repent!" "Repent" means to change what you're doing because you know the wonderful truth about the Lord Jesus' presence in your life. "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near you." That was the chief message of Jesus' preaching while on this earth. It doesn't mean, "Be very afraid because God is going to get you otherwise." If that's what "the kingdom of heaven is near you" implied, then you'd run away faster! But Peter says, "Repent, and turn to God because it's true that Jesus has risen for you. To repent is to acknowledge that my way is wrong and foolish, and that I need the Lord almighty and risen again close in my life. It is to draw near to the gift of God that my sins have been "wiped out," Peter said, through Christ, who died for me. To repent is to break the old habits however solid they may be, and to live God's way as he has enabled me, since he has forgiven me. Then the second thing Peter says is, "Draw near to God."

In my basement we have an old sink to use to wash up in after chores. On that sink was an old dispenser of liquid soap which was in the basement because it leaked a little and made a mess under it. Eventually, it made a pile of mushy liquid soap all around where it sat, and being mostly leaked empty, I threw it out. However, there was no sense in wasting the glob of soap scum all orange and gooey. For quite a while I could just go down there to wash up and rub the spot where the soap used to be and get enough on my hands to wash with. Don't worry, I've cleaned it up now that I have to sell the house.

But I wonder how many of us treat Christ like that, sort of going through the motions without it really being there. With the soap it worked for a while, but eventually even that stain of soap would have worn out, you know, and eventually if that's all your worship or devotion is, you'll hit the point of wondering whether God is really there. Peter says, don't just act the part, but "turn to God," draw near to him. Set aside that time just to be with him. Set your heart to seek him, because the Bible says you'll find him, and you'll also find what Peter hopes for for all of us, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you-- even Jesus."

Times of refreshment. Don't you love how that sounds? To people who have struck out time and again in life, and who have known failure and sin, what could be

better? Every organization in Zion Lutheran Church learns it at one point or another, that if you want to attract a crowd of people to whatever it is you are doing, you have to include these four simple words: "Refreshments will be served." Even if it's just cookies and punch, you'll get people into the room. But what refreshes your soul? Three things, according to Peter: 1) Knowing your sins are wiped out. By the grace of God I hope you know that is true since Christ is risen from the dead, and thereby we know the sacrifice for all of your sins has been complete. 2) Times of refreshment, where you are not burdened by the law or by accusations anymore, but where you simply relax like a jogger in a lawn chair in the shade, knowing that the Lord God truly loves you and is happy with you in Christ. 3) that Christ the Lord, who has been appointed for you, may be sent to you, even Jesus. The one who said he is with you always, wants it to be made real in your life and in your experience, as you walk with him by repenting and by turning to him as part of the habit of your life.

You know, when you've messed up, and somebody comes along and fixes your mistakes, you know you are not only forgiven, but also loved. I can still see my Dad sawing off the tongue of that wagon shorter, and putting it back on. God forgave those Jews Peter preached to who silently let Jesus die, and now they become followers of Christ. God forgave Peter, the denier, who is now the preacher of the Gospel. God healed the shriveled legs of the beggar so that he leaped for joy. And though the law and our conscience may say of us, "Strike 3! You really messed up this time!" yet our Lord brings wonderful refreshment to our hearts by Jesus, who has said, "I have forgiven you and risen from the dead to prove it! My love for you is real." Amen.