

## **The Lord does it.**

Mark 1:15

A sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

In the beginning of the Gospel of Mark the theme is announced. Jesus says: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

That's the whole thing. What in the world does it mean? It says: "You have to repent. You have to believe." You have to believe in the gospel, whatever that is. This text, Mark 1:15, becomes an important exercise in how to use the Bible and what we are doing in our worship service when we confess our sins.

Commonly we think of sin and sins in terms of certain bad behaviors. We say this is a sin, and that's a sin, and that's a sin. This sin is worse, and that one is not as serious. In fact we divide sins by saying: There are little sins and big sins, and we sort of tie them in with the Ten Commandments. Those are the big ones, and then there are lesser ones. Then there are also those sins that we think about, ones we'd like to do, but don't do. And just thinking about them is not as bad as actually doing them.

We also talk about sins of commission and sins of omission. Regarding sins of omission we then we distinguish those sins we omitted because we didn't know better. We say they were inadvertent or unconscious. We distinguish between those we knew, and those we didn't know. Some churches use in their worship services 1 John 1:8-9: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This suggests that there are sins and we confess them, and they are taken care of because we confess them.

But in the same book of 1 John it also says this: "No one who abides in him sins" (1 John 3:6). And a few verses later: "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). In other words, if you're a Christian, then you don't sin. Otherwise, you're not a Christian!

We know that Catholics distinguish between mortal and venial sins. And in 1 John 5 it says there is sin that are mortal and sin which is not mortal (1 John 5:16). But 1 John 3:15 states: "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer." Here one's inner thoughts and feelings are as bad as doing the deed. We are more familiar with Matt 5:28: "Whoever lusts commits adultery." It is a far different way than our common way of saying this is what sin is and that's what it is not.

It is really too bad that the confessional portion of our worship service does not include what Luther so often emphasized: Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." In

other words, it's not just the bad things we do but the good ones, too. They, too, are riddled with sin. It's a devastating judgment.

Lest one dismiss this saying: "That's just one verse, and it's from the Old Testament," we remember what Paul writes in Romans 3:10-20:

"None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.' Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive.' The venom of asps is under their lips.' Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.' Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know.' There is no fear of God before their eyes.'

"Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

It's a devastating judgment. In the study of these things there's a sentence about this: "It is not possible not to sin." There are no degrees of sin. In fact it is even incorrect to say that sin is in the plural. Yes, the plural is used but these are simply examples, illustrations throughout the Bible of things that are sin. But basically, sin is a totality, a power.

The great temptation we have is that we then define sin. We think we can determine what it is. It is really best illustrated by what happened to Adam and Eve. The snake came and tempted them: "Of course you can eat from all the trees except this one." Then the snake subtly assures them that they can determine what to do.

The real temptation is to think that we can define sin. Most people know Matthew 7:1: "Judge not that you be not judged." But few know the passage in 1 Cor 4:3-4: "I do not even judge myself. I am not thereby acquitted. . . It is the Lord who judges me." We think we're able to judge ourselves, but we are not.

How then does one know what sin is about? That's very specifically there in Scripture. Through the cross. The cross tells us that sin is something so enormous and so awful that only God could handle it and he handled it this way. It is the cross which defines what sin is.

We talk about sin and big sin and little sin, but every sin is against God's holiness, against the Lord being Lord. That's our problem. We don't want to have the Lord be the Lord. We want to have some say in this. We want to interpret and distinguish, but the Lord is the one who determines what this is all about. That's something we don't do and can't do.

As you know, Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Creed starts out: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." It

would be possible to restate that in terms of “repent and believe” in Mark 1:15: “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot repent.” I can’t and I don’t. Thank God he has taken care of it. He took care of it on the cross and that settles it. It’s over.

We go back to another favorite verse of Luther’s, 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

He takes our sin. We take his life, his holiness. The Happy Exchange. The Sweet Swap.

If all this is true, then why do we begin our worship service a confession of sin? Why are we called upon to repent? Why are we called upon to confess our sins?

We can borrow an illustration from the Old Testament. The prophets were continually fighting with the people because the people turned “sacrifice” into the same thing that we do with “sin” and “repentance.” The people figured out: “O.K. if you commit this sin, then this costs you three sheep, and that sin costs you a bushel of grain.”

No, that’s not what God says in the Old Testament and the prophets are continually going after that by pointing out: “You can’t buy off God.” It’s not like this: “If you kill somebody, you can take care of that by sacrificing a whole ox.” No, that’s not possible. Rather, out of the Lord’s mercy he is calling you to repent as a help to you.

The same is true in the confession in our worship service or when we are called upon to repent sins in the plural. This is simply a way that the Lord says: “This helps you a little bit to wake up.” But it’s not that you depend on your confessing, or that you confess all of the sins you are aware of, or that you confess them seriously, earnestly.

Luther has some advice on this matter (Large Catechism; Confession 18-22):

“We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God’s Word. We should not act as if wanted to perform a magnificent work to present to him, but simply to accept and receive something from him. You dare not come and say how good or how wicked you are. . . . But what you must do is lament your need and allow yourself to be helped so that you may attain a happy heart and conscience. . . . The Word or absolution, I say, is what you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude.”

And then finally, we come to the final temptation, thinking we can avoid sin. There is a religious saying that speaks to this: “It is not possible not to sin.” Not even good deeds make the grade. In fact, as Paul mockingly writes in Romans 3:8, 6:1, and 6:15: “Let us sin that grace may abound.” Or in 3:8: “Why not do evil that good may come?” Paul then says something that is the closest thing to a swear word that you find in the New Testament, although this doesn’t really come through in the English translation. He says: “God forbid!” He writes (paraphrase): “You have misunderstood the whole thing. The fact that sin is so

terrible and that God has taken care of it does not lead to: 'Hey, let's sin some more that grace may abound!' No, you've misunderstood what it's about because what it's about is that he has done it all. You are a heartbeat away from death, on your way to nothingness, and he rescues you and gives you life, a future, and 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21)."

We are free now, free to live and do what is needed to foster life in this time and place, free to serve the neighbor. We don't have to worry about earning merit or balancing our account with the Lord. He has taken care of it. Sin, death, and the devil are taken care of.

To have the Lord be Lord of our lives, and that means in every aspect of our lives, is something we can't quite stomach. But thank God, he takes care of it. Amen