

Sermon for October 12, 2014 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 55:6-9 (NIV84)

Theme: **Call on the LORD while He is near!**

- 1) *He is willing to pardon your sin. (7-9)*
- 2) *His offer will not last forever. (6)*

⁶ *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.* ⁷ *Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.* ⁸ *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.* ⁹ *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

I subscribe to emails from Groupon (an online sales service) alerting me to deals I might want. There was a time (ok, it might have actually happened more than once) when I was alerted to a heavily discounted item I wanted to purchase. I put the item in my online shopping cart but (because my wallet was in another room and I was too lazy to get it) I hit the save button thinking I would purchase it later. Of course I forgot.

However, Groupon (not wanting to miss a sale) sent me a reminder email encouraging me to make my purchase before its too late. "Oh, I better do that," I thought to myself, "but not right now – I have more important things to do." A day later, when I actually got around to purchasing the item, guess what? The discount had expired and the item was more than double the sale price.

Some of you might say: "Well, if you didn't make the effort to purchase the item when you first heard about it, it probably wasn't all that important to you." True, at the time it wasn't important to me. But later, when I actually needed that item, I became very disappointed with myself for wasting my opportunity.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our gracious God has sent a message to the entire world - making us an offer that we would be foolish to ignore: the forgiveness of all sins, which he promises to provide at no cost to us. He paid for it in full. There is no catch or gimmick: the LORD will freely forgive any and everyone who comes to him in repentance and faith.

Sadly, not too many people are rushing to take God up on this offer. And why not? Don't misunderstand them: they like the deal. "But just not today. We are busy. We have too many other things to do." They view God's offer like I viewed my Groupon: it's a good deal, but not important enough for me at the moment to actually go and get. However, if they wait too long, they might miss out on it forever. And here's the thing: once the offer of forgiveness is gone, it is gone for good – never to be obtained again at any price.

Let us, with the Spirit's help, learn to **Call on the LORD while He is near!** *1) He is willing to pardon your sin. 2) His offer will not last forever.*

Part One: He is willing to pardon your sin.

Isaiah writes: ⁶ *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.* ⁷ *Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him,*

and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

Can you picture it? The LORD is reaching out to all people with arms wide open. Knowing how helplessly evil we are - how *every inclination of [man's] heart is evil from childhood*ⁱ - the LORD asks us to leave our corrupt thoughts and ways in order to receive forgiveness, life and salvation.

Now, when we hear God's Word say that mankind is totally corrupt and evil, we are tempted to think: "But I am not that bad. Look at those terrorists from ISIS – that's pure evil. Neither my non-Christian friends nor I are like them. Like most people, I want peace, tolerance and love. Doesn't this prove that most people are basically good?"

While it is true that many people, including unbelievers, can do good things, this does not mean that they are good. For example, I am sure that some of the most brutal members of ISIS show acts of love towards their family. But I don't think a single one of us here would call them good people. What matters is what is in the heart, and what God sees in the hearts of all people is selfishness and sin. Even the good that people do is not really "good" because – unless it is done out of faith – it does not stem from proper motives.

I know that this is hard to understand. This is one of the reasons the LORD says in the next verse: "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*" declares the LORD.⁹ "*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God's motives and ways are far higher than ours. Humans only love those who are willing to love them back. But God loves all, even those who hate him. Man's thoughts are always selfish. God's thoughts are selfless. Man's ways are tainted with sin. God's ways are pure and holy. Yes, God is far above us. He knows that we are powerless, that we can't even begin to comprehend him and his salvation on our own. He knows that we are helplessly lost – doomed to the same fate as the devil and his demons unless He does something to save us.

And so God decided to do something utterly amazing. Knowing, even before our creation, that we would sin, God made it his will to save us by sending his Son to both earn the righteousness we need to stand before him and pay for all our sins. And so, *at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*ⁱⁱ

Eternal life and salvation – these are the thoughts God has towards us. And how does he offer us these gifts? Through the faith the Holy Spirit creates on our hearts through the preaching of his Word. Even though we are powerless in and of ourselves to come to him, God's Spirit moves in our hearts through his Word – making the unwilling willing. God's law shows us how corrupt and wicked we are – moving us to cry out: "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." And then the Lord proclaims to us the Good news: that he is merciful and will freely pardon all our sin. Why? Because Jesus paid for it all! He loves us more than any earthly father or mother could love their child. He wants us to be with him forever in heaven.

This is why he calls all people to repent. What does it mean to repent? It is, first of all, realizing and confessing our sins to God – being truly sorry for committing them - and then trusting God's promise that we are forgiven for Christ's sake.

Repentance will lead us to forsake our sinful ways and selfish thoughts. We will strive to avoid the things that lead us to lust, gossip, be angry, and pursue worldly pleasure and leisure. The only way we can do

this is with the Holy Spirit's help – for without him and the forgiveness he offers us, we would be powerless to change.

Part Two: His offer will not last forever

“But do I have to change right now? I mean, I certainly would rather go to heaven than hell when I die. But can't I also live for myself a little – enjoying the pleasures the world has to offer? I can always take this religious stuff more seriously later in life and repent before I die.”

If you are tempted to think this way (and let's be honest – we all are), take to heart the very first verse of our text: *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.*

God's encouragement to “seek” means to seriously pursue the LORD in a single minded way – much like you might search for a diamond engagement ring that you just lost. And he wants us to do this “while he may be found” (or a better way of putting it might be: “while he allows himself to be found”).

Our gracious God has only allowed himself to be found in the Gospel - calling out to us through His Word to repent and live. But the truth is that, if we neglect the opportunity he gives us to repent and believe, we might lose it.

None of us know when we might die. We could be killed in a car crash on the way home from worship this morning or die of a heart attack tonight. Only God knows when our time of grace – our time to repent and believe – will come to an end.

On top of this, at any moment, the sun could stop shining, the moon turn to blood and the angel's trumpet blast – heralding the end of time!

God could also simply remove our opportunity to hear the Gospel and believe. If we refuse to repent, he could allow us to become like the people of Israel in Isaiah's time, of whom the LORD said: “*Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

The point is that God's gracious call to come to him for forgiveness and life is not like some “Groupon” that we won't miss if we let it expire, or can purchase at a later date. Once it's gone, it's gone – and we are left outside of God's kingdom because we despised the costly gift of salvation he so generously offered us.

But take note, dear Christian: God does not want us to be outside of his kingdom. He takes no pleasure in the death of anyone, but wants all to turn to him and live. This is why he continues to call out through faithful pastors, Sunday school teachers, missionaries, evangelists, parents and all concerned Christians to seek him while He still allows himself to be found.

“*Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*”^{iv} Do not put off his call to repent and follow him in faith. But you might say: “I already am a Christian. I was baptized and confirmed. I have nothing to worry about.” To this I reply, “I praise God that you are baptized and confirmed, but realize that these things are not magic charms that allow you to live however you want with no thought of repentance and faith.

Martin Luther once wrote: “*When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "Repent", He called for the*

entire life of believers to be one of repentance. In other words because we have a sinful nature that will remain in us until the day we die, we never stop repenting - turning to the Lord, confessing our sins and trusting in his mercy to forgive. We never stop pursuing him through his word and sacraments – meeting him in the place where he allows himself to be found and receiving from him all the mercy and love he freely offers.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Do you hear God calling you to call on him in prayer and meet him in his Word and Sacraments? Answer his call and run to him as fast as a young child runs to his father when he realizes that he is in danger. Leave behind all your earthly ambitions and run to his outstretched arms; for he will freely pardon all your sins, and show you great mercy and love. Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 8:21, NIV84

ⁱⁱ Romans 8:6-8, NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 6:9-10, NIV84

^{iv} Hebrews 4:7, NIV84