

**The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 19-20, 2017**  
**Matthew 15:21-28**

*The Augsburg Confession: Repentance – The Christian Way of Life*

It feels like our country is being torn apart, and the whole world is watching. What took place in Charlottesville last weekend, just a few hours to the west, cannot be ignored or brushed aside. Those images are burned into our minds and we cannot “unsee” them. Now, what will we do with them? We must pay attention and respond. Most, if not all of us, have visited the picturesque town of Charlottesville and spent time there, or we have family members who attended the University of Virginia (UVA). We shake our heads in disbelief and wonder how things could ever have gotten to such a point, not just in Charlottesville but everywhere. The unrest, the tension, the anger is all around us. We seem to be treading the same ground and fighting the same battles that our forebears did in previous generations. Have we learned nothing from history, from those who have gone before us? Racism, prejudice, and white supremacy are not dead and buried in the distant past. No, they remain alive and well in our nation today, as we have all seen. Our hallowed First Amendment specifically allows freedom of speech, as well as the “right of the people *peaceably* to assemble.” That seems to be sorely tested with torchlight processions bearing the Nazi swastika and parading in the white robes and hoods of the Ku Klux Klan. Are such gatherings *peaceable* assemblies? The underlying premise of such organizations is inherently evil as they call for the subjugation, domination, and even the annihilation of other people groups deemed to be inferior. To those who advocate such things, to those who engage in acts of violence to further such an agenda, the Word of God stands clear: **“Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does not wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”** (Romans 13:8-10). That’s what our faith comes down to: love for God and love for our neighbor. When we fall short of loving our neighbor, hard as it is at times to love our neighbor, we turn to the Lord in repentance. It is what Christ calls us to do. Our summer preaching series on the Augsburg Confession continues this day as we focus on “Repentance – The Christian Way of Life.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Today’s Scripture lessons make clear that God’s covenant of grace goes far beyond just the descendants of Abraham, the chosen race of Israel. Look at the Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 56:1, 6-8), in which the Lord clearly proclaims that foreigners and outcasts, and not just the house of Israel, are to be included. Jesus himself quotes this passage from Isaiah when He cleansed the temple, driving out the money changers (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46) who had built a monopoly on sacrificial offerings used for temple worship, all with tacit approval from religious leaders: **“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples”** (Isaiah 56:7b). The problem here is that we have assumed the role of being God’s gatekeepers; we are continually trying to narrow down what God has said. Although salvation is indeed for all people through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, received by God’s grace through faith, we are not always comfortable with the wideness of God’s mercy. “What about *those* people?” We put ourselves on the judgement seat, and for this the Lord God call us to repentance. This is what the Lord calls us to do: **“Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed”** (Isaiah 56:1). And that’s it right there: try as we might, and in spite of our best intentions, our justice and our righteousness will be imperfect because of the sin that clings so closely throughout our entire life (Hebrews 12:1). This is why God sent his only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin – our injustice and our unrighteousness. When Jesus cried out on the cross, **“It is finished”** (John 19:30), all the work of our redemption was finished fully and forever for us by Jesus. The overwhelming mountain of our debt of sin has been marked, “Paid in full,” written in

the blood of Jesus. Jesus' work of redemption is indeed finished, but the work of our own sanctification – growing more Christ-like – is never finished this side of heaven. From hearts that are filled with gratitude and thanks for God's amazing grace in Jesus, we go forth to keep justice and do righteousness, trusting that the Lord is not finished with us yet, and graciously works through our imperfect service.

In today's Gospel lesson (Matthew 15:21-28), we meet an outsider, a foreigner and outcast, who was pretty much considered a non-entity by the good people of Israel. And yet, she has faith that Jesus can help her and bless her little daughter with healing. She This Canaanite woman was likely a descendant of the original people who lived in the land before the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Or she may have been from those foreign people who were brought in to populate the land when God's people were exiled into Babylon. Regardless, she had a need and sought out Jesus – not a need for herself, but for her child. As we know, a parent will do just about anything for the sake of his or her child, especially if that child is in need. A strange scene follows in which Jesus seems to push her away: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** and **“It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs”** (Matthew 15:24, 26). Wow – is Jesus calling this woman a dog? That's pretty harsh, but we've heard a lot worse in our own day with name calling. In first-century Israel, this is how God's chosen people looked on those who were foreigners: they were commonly referred to as “dogs.” Dogs not like our furry and friendly pets, but nasty feral animals who ate the garbage in the street. So what was Jesus up to here? Was He testing this woman? Scripture does not tell us, but what we are told is that the woman, kneeling before Jesus, said this: **“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table”** (Matthew 15:27). That's faith! Coming before the Lord in all our need, knowing that we do not have a leg to stand on and that we have absolutely no claim on the Lord except by his grace, trusting that the Lord will help us as no one and nothing else can do. Again and again in the Gospels, it is the outsiders, it is the foreigners (as well as the demons) who recognize who Jesus is as this woman did. Her cry of faith ought to be our own cry as well: **“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David...”** (Matthew 15:22). We can only come before the Lord with repentance. How can we, who are but dust and ashes (Genesis 18:27), with our brief life like a mist or vapor that appears for a moment and then is gone (James 4:14), do anything but this? And repentance is simply this: an about-face from the old life of sin that is a curving in on self and a turning to the Lord who creates in us new and clean hearts (Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 36:26). Repentance is not a one-time thing; sort of a “one and done.” Quite the opposite. Repentance is ongoing and daily in the life of the believer. Luther himself affirmed this with the first of his 95 Theses nailed to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ... willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.” And so it is to be with us all. It may well be this thing called repentance will be mighty important going forward for the life of our communities and our nation.

When all is said and done, repentance is about more than just feeling sorry for sin; the evil we have done and the good we have left undone. That sorrow over sin, contrition, is important, but we can't just stay in that place. It must lead us somewhere beyond sorrow. Repentance must lead to faith that God not only can forgive me, but that in Jesus He already has. That is the good news that has the power to transform hearts and minds, changing us from vessels bent on hatred and destruction into vehicles of Jesus' redeeming love. May God make it so in each of our lives for Jesus' sake. Amen.