

"AS IF CHRIST OUR DEAR LORD DEALT WITH US HIMSELF"

Confession & Absolution for Lent



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As if Christ Our Dear Lord Dealt with Us Himself: Confession and Absolution for Lent.

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To the glory of our Triune God
and for the Evangelical Lutheran Church
wherever she is found.

When I urge you to go to
Confession, I am doing nothing else
than urging you to be a
Christian.

- Martin Luther

Introduction

When Martin Luther penned those words (“When I urge you to go to confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian”) in German (that is what his handwriting looked like on the previous page, in English thanks to the magic of computerized fonts) he was not laying down some new law that Christians had to follow. He was not saying that people who don’t seek out private confession and absolution were not Christians. He was simply restating the teaching of the Bible about the gracious gift of God that we have in confession, most especially the gift of Absolution. Preachers are bound by God to offer it to their people. It has been commanded by Jesus. Hearers are encouraged to partake in such a gift, but never by force.

As we have for five years now, this year our Lenten devotion covers a part of the Small Catechism, the core book of Lutheran doctrine especially meant for all Lutherans to believe, teach, and confess. This year we cover confession and absolution along with the Office of the Keys. While every Christian knows how to confess from praying the Lord’s Prayer, there are many other ways to hear the Gospel (absolution) for the sake of your conscience and faith in Jesus. This is not some creation of man or of the church, but Christ our Lord handed it to His Church and also then to His ministers to be done for the sake of His Christians. There is no greater treasure for the Christian than the Gospel of forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ Jesus. Confession and absolution is nothing more than the verbal handing over of that Gospel from mouth of a Christian (especially a pastor) to the ear of a Christian.

This season of Lent, the devotions that are coming to you in this book are meant to teach you from God’s Word about this gift of confession and absolution. Lutherans keep the confession for the sake of the absolution. It’s not that we want to know more about your sins (the Bible tells us already) but we want you to hear the forgiveness of those sins. We want Christian homes to be places where sins are confessed unto one another and forgiven for the sake of Jesus. We want congregations to be so centered on the Gospel that everything they do revolves around the forgiveness of sins that Christ has earned. This is a gift of God, and so as Christians we want to receive the gift and make use of it, and then share that gift with others. Our gracious and generous God would have it no other way among us.

As we have in previous years, each week’s devotions revolve around the lessons used in worship. Sundays are always focused on the Gospel lesson for that given Sunday according to the historic one-year lectionary. The other devotions for the week are based around selected lessons that are used in midweek services, texts selected for their being the basis for a given week’s teaching on confession and absolution. Each Saturday

has a special devotion on a particular and common objection or question about confession and absolution. You will likely have found yourself asking them or hearing others say them over time. Those devotions are going to be invaluable in helping you and your household understand this gift and to speak of it to others.

There are many different types of confession and absolution. First, there is the common confession we make in the Lord's Prayer. Next, there is the confession we make to those we sin against, our spouses, our children, our fellow congregation members, our neighbors. There is also the general confession you make and general absolution you hear when you attend Divine Service. There is a type of confession and absolution that some Christians have learned, and others have not yet – the practice of individual confession and absolution (or private confession and absolution). In reading this devotion it is a hope that you would seek out your pastor to talk more about this type of confession and absolution and benefit from it. Hopefully through such a practice you learn about the great tool that God has given your pastor to use to help you and take care of your soul.

The word of forgiveness is our life. That's what Christ has earned for us, a forgiven life that lasts forever. That's what Christ has commanded to come to us through the beautiful words of the absolution as well – nothing less than heaven itself. His work, His gift, His blessing for our sake. May you be blessed in using these devotions.

In Christ,

Rev. Joshua V. Scheer
Steadfast Lutherans

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21

Everything in our daily lives is trying to get us to focus on the here and now, with some fear for the future along with it. That is simply put, the way of the world, reflecting a lack of trust in God for the care of both today and tomorrow and all the future to come. The world wants your attention, and so it distracts you with its constant newsfeed, one “crisis” after another, all geared on keeping your attention (which eventually translates into your money) on the world and its ways.

This Lent, let the world be the world. You are in it, but Christ says that you are not of the world. You have heavenly things before you. Yes, the callings to which God has called you. You are in the home, in the church, and yes in a civic community. Your good works, the fruit of faith in Jesus are placed into those areas (estates), but it is also in those areas where you will find your sinful nature acting up in actual sins.

An earthly focus on this will seek to ignore your sins, explain them away (self-justification), find a miserable existence of despair under guilt, or just grow an anger toward God in heaping sin upon sin. A heavenly focus knows what God has done about those sins. Christ has come to redeem you from the guilt of those sins. He has taken those sins upon Himself, and by His sacrifice made Himself both just and the justifier. When this heavenly treasure is given you to and you trust in it, this earthly existence looks a little different. Christ has given His Spirit and a new life, one where your treasure is not on earth for earthly things to take it away, but treasure stored up in heaven.

This Lent, we will be hearing through these devotions all about Christ’s gift of absolution. How does Jesus give us heavenly treasure? By His Word. His Word is undergirding the absolution and brings exactly what it says – the forgiveness of sins. We know this from the Word, which will show us over and over again the great treasure that absolution is.

Lent is a penitential season – a season of emphasis on repentance. It brings with it disciplines like fasting, extra opportunities to gather at church, to give alms or other extra offerings. It is a season of growing in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this year that means growing in making our confession and hearing our absolution.

Lord Jesus, help us to treasure all that You have done for us, and by Your Spirit to avoid the snares of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. Amen.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 1 Corinthians 11:23

It may seem a little strange to use the Words of Institution for the Lord's Supper as one of the opening devotions for confession and absolution, but the practice of confession has long been a tool of preparing to receive the Lord's Supper. Making confession involves considering your station in life according to the Ten Commandments. Pastors then absolve such sins and may offer pastoral counsel along with their care. Strength to lead a new life is found in the Gospel as the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to cooperate with His leading. That's what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer.

On top of this preparation for the Sacrament of the Altar, there is also the principal that St. Paul reflects in this passage – the Church and her ministers give what Jesus has given, nothing more, nothing less. As Christ came to save by His active obedience under the Law to fulfill it and by His passive obedience suffering and dying for our sake, this is then what the Church is about – the atoning work of Jesus for the sake of the world.

The Church however does not have a time machine. Nor should Christians want to take their chances of being the faithful at the foot of the cross millennia ago (what percent of those onlookers were believers vs. scoffers?). In fact there is no promise of anything special for those who were found at the foot of the cross apart from the Words that Jesus spoke there, which we have in sacred Scripture. Instead, following the pattern and practice of God since the first Sin, God comes to us who are unable to come to Him. God gives His Word to be handed down and preached through time. That Word delivers what Jesus has earned.

This is a crucial distinction that many Christians get wrong. The cross is where Christ earns our full forgiveness. The means of grace (Word and Sacraments) are where Christ has promised to deliver what He earned. So where do we go to find the forgiveness of sins today? To where Christ has promised for it to be delivered – the means of grace. We may remember this about Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but it is also true in the Word of absolution.

Lord Jesus, help us to faithfully seek out the forgiveness You earned at the cross in the things You have promised to deliver that forgiveness through. Amen.

Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. 2 Corinthians 2:10-11

St. Paul here is speaking of the Christian forgiveness that we practice with one another, especially in the case of someone who sinned badly and ended up in full public judgment because of it. He encourages forgiveness to the penitent – no matter the size or ripple effect of the sin.

We are reminded here also in this text that the forgiveness spoken by ministers (St. Paul as example) is done for the sake of the people of God in the presence of Christ. Christ has commanded penitent sinners to be forgiven. Pastors are to do this for the sake of Christ's people.

What does it mean to be outwitted by Satan? It can take many forms. In the case of forgiveness, Satan tempts us to withhold forgiveness or to mask such inward bitterness by “forgiving but not forgetting”. Satan also tempts us to continue to judge the sinner in comparison to ourselves, the old temptation to become Pharisees who try to earn our way into heaven. Such a view plays right into Satan's designs, for it draws the Christian into unbelief and eventually into condemnation itself.

When you are presented with a person who has sinned against you and confesses or apologizes for it, this is the decision before you: treat the sinner like Christ wants you to or to treat the sinner like Satan wants you to. To help you in this you may want to remind yourself of what Christ has forgiven you, since our Lord ties our forgiveness from Him to our forgiving others so well in the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer.

Lord Jesus, help us to forgive as You have forgiven us. Grant us the wisdom to see the schemes of the devil behind our desire to withhold forgiveness of the penitent, to justify our bitterness, or to compare other sinners to ourselves. Amen.

And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"
Luke 5:20-21

ONLY GOD CAN FORGIVE SIN

"Only God can forgive sin." You've heard this sentiment expressed before. Many self-professing Christians say it. It was also the opinion of the Pharisees. When once our Lord Jesus absolved a paralytic whom he was about to heal, the Pharisees asked indignantly, **"Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21).** That Jesus had the audacity to do this was outrageous to them.

It is true that God forgives sin, but it is equally true that it pleases God to give this authority to men. We see how our Lord Jesus made this promise to his disciples. Jesus said in Matthew 16, **"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19).** Jesus repeated this promise in Matthew 18, **"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).** Finally he said to his disciples on the evening of his resurrection, **"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld" (John 20:22-23).** Jesus' words couldn't be clearer. He has conferred the authority of binding and loosing, of forgiving and withholding forgiveness, on ordinary men.

This is how your pastor may stand before the entire Christian congregation and pronounce the absolution. Any objection to this because "only God can forgive sin" clearly contradicts the testimony of Scripture and the will of our Lord Jesus. We know today that there is nothing for the Christian to fear or find offense at in the absolution. For us it is a word which opens heaven, because behind it is the power of Jesus' resurrection.

Immature Christians may grumble about the absolution, but for us we treasure it as a gift from the hand of our Lord Jesus. When Jesus healed the paralytic, the crowd **"glorified God, who had given such authority to men" (Matthew 9:8).** Rather than chafe and bristle at this authority, God's people may not only embrace it, but they can marvel at it too.

Lord Jesus, help us to reject false ideas not found in Your Holy Word. Thank you for the marvelous word of forgiveness. Amen.



Temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4)

Then the devil left him [Jesus], and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. Matthew 4:11

Jesus resisted the temptations of the devil.

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” “It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.””

Deuteronomy 8:3 is Jesus’ weapon in this conflict. What God wanted Israel to learn in the wilderness Jesus already knew. The Word of God is life. The Word is the only weapon that works against Satan. Therefore, we are to be in the Word!

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down [from the temple], for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,’ and “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.” “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.””

The devil knows Scripture and misquotes psalm 91:11-12, intentionally omitting **“Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—”** before **“no evil shall be allowed to befall you...”**

Jesus properly cites Deuteronomy 6:16, in accordance with its meaning in context. **“All these [kingdoms of the world] I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.””**

Jesus is aware of the temptations we face. He’s been there, done that, and conquered that with the Word, specifically, Deuteronomy 6:13. Jesus resisted the temptation of the devil. Jesus Himself comes and ministers to you with His words of absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself. In Jesus, your sins are forgiven before God in heaven!

O Lord, mercifully hear our prayer and stretch forth the right hand of Your majesty to defend us from all enemies that rise up against us; through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah. Psalm 32:5

In the order of confession and absolution of the Common Service of 1888, also known as "page 15" in *The Lutheran Hymnal* and Divine Service 3 in *Lutheran Service Book*, we hear the pastor say the words of David: "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And we all respond, "And You forgave the iniquity of my sin."

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit."

Verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 32 acknowledge the blessings of "absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven."

There is great comfort in absolution. Confession is done for the sake of absolution. Private Confession and Absolution should be taught and restored to practice where it has fallen into disuse. Ask your pastor for it and make a practice of using it. "Our churches teach that private absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing all sins is not necessary for Confession. For, according to the Psalm, it is impossible. **"Who can discern his errors?" (Psalm 19:12).** (Augsburg Confession XI)

The last verses of Psalm 32, 10 and 11, reflect on the contrast between the wicked and the one who trusts in the Lord. Holding sins back from Christ leads only to sorrow. There is great joy in an absolved, clear, comforted conscience!

"Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"

Almighty God, grant that we who deserve to be afflicted for our evil deeds may mercifully be relieved by the comfort of Your grace; through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. 1 John 1:9-10

Most people dislike hypocrisy. Jesus doesn't like hypocrites, either. Say one thing and do another. Pious on Sunday and lying, cheating, stealing, and cussing the rest of the week. God is not mocked. He knows the heart of His own.

Don't miss the point of the text. John wants us to deal with the hypocrite within *our own hearts*. Refusing to forgive—holding a grudge—is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to drop dead.

When we “confess,” we say the same thing. When we confess *the faith*, we say the same thing as the Word teaches as well as the person next to us in the pew. We also confess along with our sister congregations around the country and world and with all the saints who have confessed and lived before us.

When we confess *our sins*, we say the same thing as the Lord does in His Word. For instance, one of our confessions of sin reads: Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name.

When we confess our sins, we acknowledge the truth of verses 8 and 9 of 1 John 1. And the Word brings the comfort of the first two verses of 1 John 2: **But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.**

Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us. Amen.

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Luke 7:47-50

To paraphrase, Jesus said, “The forgiveness of sins means something to one who has sins.” Peace + be with you” is what the newly baptized hear after they have received the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. “Depart + in peace” is the blessing you hear as you depart the Lord’s Table, having received the Body and Blood of your Lord for the forgiveness of your sins. At Divine Service, and a funeral, we sing or say “Lord, now You let Your servant go in peace...” “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and + give you peace.” “Peace” is the final word you hear proclaimed by the Lord’s servant before the final hymn.

When we are regarded according to our sinfulness, Christians are not better than non-Christians. That mindset would only make us hypocrites. We tend to think of some sins as greater than others. In this world, there may be fewer consequences for some sins rather than others, and before God there are also distinctions of sins. Even one single sin however is enough to deserve eternal punishment.

The real difference between believers and non-believers is that we have faith in Christ, are forgiven by Him, and have been given the Holy Spirit. The forgiveness of sins means something to one who has sins. Forgiveness means peace with God in Christ.

O God, from whom come all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works, give to us, Your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey Your commandments and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Psalm 51:12-13

Christians should be taught to confess. In previous generations, a common practice was for members of a Lutheran congregation to meet with the pastor on a Saturday before partaking in Holy Communion on Sunday. Sadly, knowledge of this practice is often limited to the memories of the congregation's most elderly members.

We confess in prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We confess to each other. James 5:16 reminds us to confess our sins to one another. We confess as a congregation. A common confession of sin is most familiar to us now at the beginning of Divine Service. Corporate Confession is not uncommon on Ash Wednesday.

In Augsburg Confession article XXV we hear, "Confession in the churches is not abolished among us. The body of the Lord is not usually given to those who have not been examined [1 Corinthians 11:27–28] and absolved. The people are very carefully taught about faith in the absolution. Before, there was profound silence about faith. Our people are taught that they should highly prize the absolution as being God's voice and pronounced by God's command. The Power of the Keys [Matthew 16:19] is set forth in its beauty. They are reminded what great consolation it brings to anxious consciences and that God requires faith to believe such absolution as a voice sounding from heaven [e.g., John 12:28–30]. They are taught that such faith in Christ truly obtains and receives the forgiveness of sins."

Christians need be taught to confess. It's not something that sinners, enemies of God, those dead in their trespasses and sins know how to do—or want to do. Those who have had the joy of salvation restored to them will teach other transgressors the Lord's ways and repentant sinners will seek the forgiveness of Christ.

Almighty God, according to Your great mercy in Christ, forgive us our sins, grant power to become Your children, bestow upon us the Holy Spirit, and bring this good work of Yours in us to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:28-30

What is Confession? Christians need to be taught the answer to this question. Biblical teaching is different than that of the Roman Catholic Church which usually comes to mind when confession is brought up.

Our Small Catechism teaches this – “What is Confession? Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.”

According to the Roman Catholic Church, confession has three parts. After contrition (sorrow of the soul for the sins committed) and admission of the sins (the actual confession), there is satisfaction (also known as penance, or doing something to make amends for the sin). Absolution in this system is conditional and dependent upon your works!

Lutherans know that we confess our sins in order to hear absolution. Our actions are not to be added to the completed work of Christ in His death and resurrection. A Christian making a true, sincere, and authentic confession will be willing to make amends, when possible, but making amends is not a precondition for the declaration of absolution by the pastor.

Christ meant it when He said, “It is finished.” This truth is echoed by the Lutheran Confessions in Article III of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, paragraph 14: “Therefore, the righteousness that is credited to faith or to the believer out of pure grace is Christ’s obedience, suffering, and resurrection, since He has made satisfaction for us to the Law and paid for «expiated» our sins.” The only satisfaction that is necessary to receive the forgiveness of sins as the gift they are is the satisfaction Christ made for us.

Gracious Jesus, You bore our sins in Your own body on the tree. Have mercy upon us now, and grant through Your grace eternal glory in the life to come. Amen.

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Psalm 19:12

ENUMERATION OF SINS

Article XI of the Augsburg Confession states, “Our churches teach that Private Absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing sins is not necessary for Confession. For, according to the Psalm, it is impossible. **“Who can discern his errors?”” (Psalm 19:12).** It was a major reform in Luther’s day. absolution was not dependent on enumerating sins, that is listing them all. For us the words of Psalm 19 are most instructive. The corruption of our sinful nature runs so deep, we could not enumerate every sin if we tried.

For this reason, we retain the General Absolution, which our pastors routinely speak in our Divine Services today. Jesus himself pronounced general absolutions routinely, which were not preceded by enumeration of sins. We “stand in grace” as St. Paul makes clear in Romans 5. This is true whether we enumerate our sins or not.

But naming specific sins in confession is nothing to be despised. We think of the Old Testament Day of Atonement, and we know that Aaron confessed the specific sins of the people over the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:21). When people came to John the Baptist to receive his baptism, they came “confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:6). There was nothing vague about what they were doing. The people confessed real sins as John applied a real baptism for their forgiveness.

The same is true for us today. Sin isn’t just an idea. We commit specific sins which are visible for the eye to see, and they hurt the conscience in specific ways. It is only fitting that we should also receive a specific word of forgiveness for the specific sins which we commit. When we think about surgery, the surgeon cuts into the body at a specific place. He goes where the ailment needs treatment. In the same way, confessing specific sins cuts to the very place where the conscience needs healing.

Naming sins in confession is an awesome spiritual exercise. In it we learn to humble ourselves and receive the most personally tailored care which Jesus has to offer. Sometimes these sins trouble us deeply, but it is good to learn to confess “smaller” sins too. Confession is not meant to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but a practice which we grow into and learn to appreciate.

Lord Jesus, thank You for the forgiveness of sins. Help us by Your Spirit to confess them in general and to grow in confessing them specifically that we may hear Your Word of forgiveness specifically as well. Amen.



The Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15)

Second Sunday in Lent

Matthew 15:21-28

She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Matthew 15:27

This episode with the Canaanite woman, a Gentile, that is, one not of the Children of Israel, pleading with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to help her daughter that was severely oppressed by a demon is a comforting read in the Gospel of Matthew. Some may chide Jesus for being a bit rude to the woman in her hour of need. His reaction to her is a bit surprising: **But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."** (vv. 23-24)

Yet, it is at this very offensive moment that we see the faith of this woman on full display. Look at her humility in comparing herself, a Gentile, to dogs that eat crumbs from their master's table. Her humility and expression of faith here is commendable. She has heard about Jesus and sought him out to help her daughter. And when Jesus properly states that he's been sent to the people of Israel, she doesn't yell at him or storm off in offense. Rather, she agrees with Jesus and gives the famous statement in humility and faith as our Lord commends her.

Our gracious Lord and Savior healed her daughter...instantly. Take a moment and marvel at the immediacy of the healing by Jesus in the reading this day. As He journeys on in His earthly ministry, Jesus remains the teacher and gracious healer. His words to that woman helped to strengthen her faith in Him, which is even a greater thing than the healing of her daughter. Confession involves the same humility and faith, and Jesus graciously grants absolution like healing for our souls.

Lord God Almighty, may we in this household, continue by Your grace to remain humble, recognizing that we are dogs that have been brought into the house of our Master. We give You thanks for Your continued showering of blessings in our lives materially and chiefly, for the Salvation won for us by Your Son on the Cross. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Ps. 121:1-2

Psalm 121 is often used in the Committal rite as we bury the remains of the faithfully departed who have been called nearer to the presence of our Lord. At the church I serve, the church cemetery is located on the side of a mountain. The posture of looking up beyond the hills points us to heaven, to look to God for aid, not down to this dreadful, sin-drenched earth.

The Psalm concludes with a strong statement: **“The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.” (Ps. 121:8)** Ponder on this fact for a moment. It’s what is spoken at the conclusion of the baptismal rite. Compare this to Jesus’ final statement at the conclusion of St. Matthew’s Gospel account: **And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28:20).** Our gracious Lord and Savior is with you always! He strengthens and protects you along your earthly journey towards your heavenly home. This glorious Gospel truth brings joy amidst sorrow. For even when we lay our loved ones to rest in the dirt of this earth, we know, believe and confess that they rest with our Lord, and they will be raised with immortal bodies in the resurrection of all flesh. For our Lord never slumbers nor sleep. He is always with us. This is always true but is magnificently on display in absolution. He graciously forgives your sins.

Almighty God, we confess that we are sinful beings, continue to forgive our sins as You have promised to do through the merits of Your Son, Jesus. We thank You for continuing to watch over us as we leave the safety of our homes and go into the world for work, worship, and play. What a joyful truth it is to know that You are with us always, to the close of this age, when You will carry us home to live with You forever in heaven. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD. 2 Samuel 11:27

Psalm 51 is introduced, “**A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.**” But David had sinned in many and various ways besides committing adultery. He was at home idle while his men fought and risked their lives in battle. He looked lustfully at Bathsheba and coveted her who was Uriah’s wife. Having committed adultery with her, he then tried to cover his sin by bringing Uriah home from war and urging him to neglect his responsibilities as a soldier. When Uriah remained devoted to his duties, David arranged for him to be killed—he planned for his murder. Then, finally, after Uriah was killed, David took Bathsheba into his own house as his own wife, as if his sole concern was the well-being of his soldier’s widow.

David tried to cover his sin by his plotting and scheming, and, perhaps for a little while, he did. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. He knew all the sins David had committed, even the ones of which David himself was unaware. We too have piled up sins upon sins, often in a misguided attempt to cover our former transgressions with further iniquities. The Lord knows all our sins, and our sins displease Him just as much as David’s did.

When we fall into sin, let us not follow David’s example in 2 Samuel 11 by trying to cover it up with more sins. Instead, let us plead guilty before God of all sins and trust in His boundless mercy, just as David himself prayed in Psalm 32: “**I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.**”

Lord God Heavenly Father, we come to You with repentant hearts. We confess our sins to You and rejoice that in Christ we have the assurance that the iniquity of our sin has been forgiven. Amen.

Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" ...David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." 2 Samuel 12:7a, 13

After David had sinned by taking to himself Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, the Lord sent a preacher to him named Nathan. And Nathan the preacher did what no other king or army or even giant could do: he brought David to his knees. And the weapon he used to do this was not a sword or spear but the Word of God alone—in particular, the stinging condemnation of God's Law. By this Word of God, the great King David was brought to true contrition for his sins against the Lord.

But contrition alone is not enough. Repentance, properly speaking, is more than feeling guilty because of your sin. It has two parts: sorrow over sin and faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, in true and godly repentance David did not despair despite the greatness of his sins; he also believed in his gracious and merciful Lord and trusted Him for forgiveness of all this trespasses. And this faith was not put to shame. When David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord," Nathan absolved David, saying, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die."

God has also sent pastors to us poor sinners, pastors who are sent by Him to rebuke us for our sins by the Law and to comfort us with Jesus' death and resurrection by the Gospel. It is true: the Law must do its harsh work of revealing the guilt of our sins. But when we know and feel sin's guilt in our hearts, we should not be afraid to go and confess our sins to that man whom God has given for the express purpose of forgiving our sins in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting that his forgiveness is none other than God's forgiveness.

Almighty Father, thank You for the gift of pastors, who pronounce forgiveness upon us in order to fulfill Your will. Amen.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Luke 13:34

In this Gospel lesson one sees the compassion of our Lord, “how often would I have gathered your children together...,” yet that sentence didn’t end there. For in His lament over Jerusalem, Jesus lays out the great tragedy of unbelief, “...you were not willing.” Those that go down to perdition get what they want, separation from God, eternally. Those who die outside of Christ damn themselves for they were not willing to return to the Lord. It’s ultimately tragic.

Jesus is on His way to make atonement for the whole world and how He longs for the people of Jerusalem then and for all people to walk in His ways, believing in Him. When people die in unbelief, it’s ultimately tragic. There are no do-overs at the point of death or Christ’s return. We give thanks to God for His divine forbearance for not returning yet, giving people time to repent from their slothful, sinful ways.

In the words of Jesus above, we also see that it’s not just that folks may disagree with faithful prophets who bring God’s Word to them, yet they are martyred for it. May we give heed to faithful Christian pastors and fellow believers who rightfully call out our sins and point us to Jesus for full and free forgiveness.

Lord God Heavenly Father, soften the hearts of those who do not believe in Your Son. Forgive us for when we have desired to reject faithful preachers who have called our sins out. Lead us to continue to confess our sins and relish in the free and full forgiveness that Your Son paid for with His innocent suffering and death for us. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Philippians 3:20-21

Here in St. Paul's letter to the Church gathered at Philippi, we have these wondrous words given about the location of our true home, heaven. Once one gets this divine fact straight in their minds, life starts to be a lot less complicated. So, what if I don't get to see every little corner of the world? This earth burns in the end. My eternal home waits for me in heaven, where Jesus will transform my dreadful, sin-drenched, decaying body to be like His glorious body, eternal, perfected, free from sin and defect. He's got the power to do this.

Yet, why does this have to happen in the first place? Because we're sinners. Adam and Eve gave into temptation and sinned, casting all mankind into Sin. We've got our own to own up to as well. As God wanted their confession, so He wants to hear yours. Confess your sins, be absolved, be forgiven. Live in the joy of the Gospel truth that you are eternal in Jesus. Yes, there's joy still in Lent, for we know where we're going, and we know and believe in the One who will set us free from this dying and decaying world. Be at peace dear ones, your sins are forgiven, and you who believe in Jesus will live forever in heaven with all of the ransomed believers from throughout time.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we come before You in confession of our sins, those known and unknown to us. We also come before You in joy of the salvation won by Jesus on the Cross outside of Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago. We give thanks that the Triune God has loved the world that Jesus laid down His life to win eternal life for us in heaven above. We rejoice that His resurrection is the preview of our resurrection when we will receive eternal bodies like His. Keep us in the true faith until You call us home to heaven. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Luke 3:8

SATISFACTION VS. FRUITS OF REPENTANCE

The absolution is a precious gift, but how do our lives look after it? A major battle of the Reformation surrounded the idea of “satisfaction.” Penitents were commanded to perform works of satisfaction, which may have had no relation to their sins at all. We think of the purchase of indulgences, pilgrimages, etc. But the danger in this is that if sinners were led to trust in their works of satisfaction, this rendered the absolution no absolution at all. A conditional absolution is no absolution. A real absolution that is trusted will bear fruit.

An error more visible in our own day is the heresy of “once saved, always saved.” Many American churches teach this, and no doubt you are exposed to it through various channels. They teach that once a person is “saved,” he can never fall away, no matter what he does. It is a wicked teaching which has led many souls to ruin. We know that King David when he fell into adultery was in a dangerous position. He had fallen away. He would have remained in that state if it weren't for God working through the prophet Nathan. David was brought to true repentance and was forgiven of his sin. The “once saved, always saved” heresy emboldens arrogant Christians and encourages laziness among those who are weaker, which is a poor witness to the world.

Against these two errors we heed the voice of John the Baptist, **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:7-8).** He reminded the Pharisees that this wasn't a game. We don't go through churchly rituals simply to look good in the sight of others. We bear fruits in keeping with repentance. John told tax collectors not to collect more than they were authorized. He told soldiers not to extort money and be content with their wages. It was real life counsel for sinners who had real life temptations.

If there is true repentance in the heart, it will manifest itself in visible fruits of repentance. Therefore, if there is no fruit of repentance, we can rightly wonder if repentance has taken place. God give us the resolve to produce these fruits. It is an awesome exercise for us and a beautiful service for our neighbor, especially those we have wronged.

Lord Jesus, grant us to confess our sins, believe the absolution, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Amen.



Exorcism of the Mute Demon (Luke 11)

Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 11:14–28

“Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it!’” Luke 11:27–28

What the woman cried out is true. Even Mary, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, **“all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48)** So, we call Mary blessed because thousands of years ago God promised a Savior to Adam and Eve and their children (Genesis 3:15), and now He fulfilled His promise through the Virgin Mary. To be sure, we shouldn’t pray to or worship Mary; nevertheless, we do acknowledge the tremendous blessing and honor she had to bear and give birth to Jesus, God in the flesh.

All this is true. So, Jesus doesn’t negate what the woman said—He simply teaches that while it is a great blessing to bear Christ as a child in the womb, it is a far greater blessing to bear Christ as the Savior in faith. And this is done by hearing the Word of God and keeping it.

When we hear the word “keep,” we think “obey.” Some Bibles translate this as “follow,” “observe,” or “put into practice,” as if Jesus were saying, “Blessed are those who fulfill the Law.” And we think, “I have not kept the Ten Commandments, so I must not be blessed.” But this isn’t what Jesus says. Here, the word “keep” means “to hold fast,” “to guard.” When speaking of the Gospel, the Bible uses this as a synonym for faith (see John 8:51). Here, Jesus teaches us that when we believe His Word, we have Him in a far more profound way than Mary was blessed to have Him: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). When God forgives all your sin through the mouth of your pastor, hear that Word of God and keep it.

Lord Jesus, Your Word is sacred, and we gladly hear and learn it. Give us the strength to keep it, and so bear in faith You as our Savior from sin, death, and the devil. Amen.

“Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.” Psalm 25:18

In Psalm 25, David is afflicted both in his body and his soul. He suffers at the hands of his enemies (v. 2), and at the same time he suffers guilt over his past sins (v. 7). It’s far better for Christians to endure persecution with a good conscience than a bad one (see 1 Peter 3:16–17). But when Christians are troubled both internally and externally, their guilt increases their pain, and their pain increases their guilt. When we endure any kind of suffering *along with* a burdened conscience, we face a great temptation to despair and lose all hope. This is the pain David feels.

David is “lonely and afflicted” (v. 16). He’s surrounded by his enemies. His heart accuses him. His mind is haunted by the memory of his past sins. He has nowhere in this world to turn. So, he turns to God, saying, **“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in You I trust,”** (v. 1), **“My eyes are ever toward the Lord”** (v. 15), **“I take refuge in You”** (v. 20). And the consolation David seeks for his heart is this: The forgiveness of all his sins (v.18).

We often increase our pain with guilt. But rather than looking to this world or to ourselves, we should turn our eyes toward the Lord. God alone gives relief. When we go to private absolution, we say, *“What troubles me in particular is . . .”* We don’t need to make up sins or enumerate them all. Just consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments and name the sins you remember, those that weigh you down. And confess them not to merit anything by your confession—Confess them to hear God’s absolution, to hear that your dear Lord has indeed forgiven all those specific sins too. Even if you may remember your sins, God doesn’t. He forgives them and He forgets them. And, instead, He remembers His great mercy for you.

Lord, consider our affliction and trouble, and forgive us all our sins. Amen.

“The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain” Deuteronomy 5:4–5

The fear of God is unpopular. Many times, the fear of God has been redefined as “reverence” for God. So, many Christians aren’t taught to fear God’s wrath. Instead, they take sin and the Law lightly, as if sin were simply “mistakes,” as if the Law were merely “suggestions.” We’ve seen the rise of “contemporary worship” which teaches people to be casual, informal, and laid-back in church, the place where God Himself is present. But those who know their own sin and God’s holiness don’t take His Word lightly; rather, they hear it, believe it, fear God, and repent.

Israel was terrified of God’s voice (Deuteronomy 5:4–5). Exodus 20:18–19 also says, **“When all the people saw the thunder and flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.’”** They couldn’t bear to hear the voice of God because it led them to a profound awareness of their own sin and unworthiness.

We should never take the Word of God lightly. We should learn that the Law is good (Psalm 119), even while it reveals our sinfulness. As you hear God’s Law, don’t dismiss it or explain it away. Examine yourself. Measure yourself against the perfect Law of God. Learn that God hates sin, and that He demands perfection. Repent. Fear God and learn to take comfort in the righteousness of Christ, your dear Lord who fulfilled the Law for you.

Lord, teach us to fear, love, and trust You above all things. Amen.

“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.” Luke 3:8

Christians often fall into one of two errors: legalism or antinomianism. On the one hand, legalism is the false doctrine that salvation is based upon good works, or that good works contribute to our salvation. In other words, good works are necessary for salvation. But the Bible speaks against legalism: **“To the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Romans 4:5).** On the other hand, antinomianism is the false doctrine that those who have true faith in the Gospel remain unchanged, that is, that one with true faith remains living deliberately in the same sin. In other words, good works and a change of behavior and life are unnecessary for the Christian life. And in today’s text, the Bible speaks against antinomianism: **“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance”** (Luke 3:8). The Bible teaches that while good works don’t cause our salvation, they do flow from our salvation.

When the crowds that were baptized asked John the Baptist, “What shall we do?” John didn’t say, “There’s nothing to do,” or “Keep living as you were.” He says, **“Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none.” To the tax collectors he said, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” To the soldiers he said, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation and be content with your wages.”** St. Paul even says, **“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands” (Ephesians 4:28).** Even Dr. Luther taught this way in his Preface to the Small Catechism. He said that the Seventh Commandment must be strongly preached to mechanics and farmers and servants, and that the Fourth Commandment ought to be taught to children, and so on. Simply put, every Christian is to bear fruits in keeping with repentance in his own vocation. So, consider your place in life. Repent of your sin. Receive the Lord’s forgiveness. And bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

Lord, give us true faith, and move us to do good works. Amen.

“[I]f it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” Romans 7:7

St. Paul teaches us the relationship between God’s Law and our sin: As God’s Law asserts what is perfect and good, it also reveals that we are not. Scriptures says, **“through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20)**. In Romans 7, Paul illustrates this point by using only one phrase of the law: “You shall not covet.” To covet is to desire what God hasn’t given us and to become discontent in what He has given us. This is condemned in the Ninth and Tenth Commandments; but, here, Paul uses it for the Law in general, to show the beginning of transgression, that is, the sin that lies behind every sin. **“Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15)**. And again, **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” (James 4:1–2)**.

When we go to confession, we ought to confess not only the sin we’ve done and said, but also the sin we’ve thought and desired. Before any sin can be committed by the mouth or hand, covetousness must first be in the heart. Before you sin against God or your neighbor, you must first be bitter and dissatisfied with God and your neighbor. This sinful desire and discontentment are the sin behind disobedience, unfaithfulness, and laziness. It’s the sin behind anger, rudeness, and quarrels. It’s what’s behind all theft, negligence, wastefulness, and harm.

Confess your own sinfulness and weakness to God. Know that God has forgiven even your urges and desires in Christ, your dear Lord, who has promised to save you from this body of death forever.

Create in us clean hearts, O God. Amen.

“Confess your sins to one another.” James 5:16

As Christians, we confess our sins directly to God (Ephesians 2:18; 1 John 1:9). Even more, God has ordained pastors to hear our confession of sins and speak God’s Word of forgiveness to us directly (John 20:23). In addition to this, God has added a third way: He has instructed us to confess our sins to one another (James 5:16). He does this because He has also given us the authority to forgive one another: **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).** Again, Jesus teaches this in the Lord’s Prayer: **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:12).**

God wants us to confront the one whom we’ve sinned against and confess our sin directly to him (Matthew 5:23–24). God also wants us to go directly to the one who has sinned *against us* (Matthew 18:15). So, there is no place for simply sitting back and waiting for the other person to come to you. God places the responsibility of reconciliation on *both* Christians—the one who sinned *and* the one who was sinned against! He turns them to one another in repentance and forgiveness.

We do very well at remembering who has sinned against us. But we do an awful job at remembering how and against whom we’ve sinned against. You won’t remember all you’ve done wrong (Psalm 19:12). That fact doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. Begin with Dr. Luther’s advice and consider your place in life: Husbands, have you loved your wife as Christ loved the church? Wives, have you submitted to your husband in all things? Fathers, have you proved your children to anger? Children, have you honored your father and mother? Christians, have you been patient and kind-hearted to each other? Confess your sins to one another and forgive one another as God forgave you.

**Lord, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Amen.**

Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Colossians 3:13

WHO CAN FORGIVE SINS?

The pastor announces the absolution publicly because he is a “called and ordained servant of the Word.” Because this is his job and does it quite regularly, we might be led to the impression that only the pastor can forgive sins. This is not true. What the pastor is called to do here publicly, all Christians may also do privately.

We turn to Matthew 18. Jesus says, **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15).** Implied in Jesus’ words is that you forgive him, and your relationship is restored. I suppose your brother may then go confess his sin to his pastor, but it was paramount that he receives forgiveness from you. That pastors may forgive sins does not nullify our need to receive forgiveness from those we have wronged. If you receive absolution from the pastor but remain at odds with your brother, this is not the way God wants it to be. Christians forgive one another with the forgiveness which Christ won for us.

The home is where all of this should start. Husbands and wives should practice confession and forgiveness. They should mediate disputes among their children using confession and forgiveness as the process and destination of their mediation. “I forgive you” are powerful words which we finally need to vocalize. We should never merely tell one another “It’s okay.” That is a tactic of the devil to silence the voice of the absolution. We know sin is not “okay”. Sin produces discord and hurt. It can only be covered by the forgiveness which Jesus won for us, and only then can life move on in a productive way.

When this happens in Christian homes, we will find it more and more within our congregations and the communities in which we live. Where real confession and forgiveness is practiced, you will find a blessed Christian people. It is human nature to hold grudges and dig up dirt from the past, and the piling up of it over time makes our relationships toxic. Forgiving one another in a Christian way allows us to move on and live at harmony and peace with one another.

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to confess our sins and to forgive each other. Amen.



Feeding the 5,000 (John 6)

Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 6:1-15

¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." John 6:11-12

We are tempted to seek after Christ only when we are in wanting. What do you hunger for? Goods, prestige, money, a reputation, the next academic degree, or do you crave something that God simply has not given to you? The crowd hungered after Jesus so that they could fill their curious bellies with Jesus' performing more signs. Repent of thanklessness and impudent neediness. These are unbecoming of a Christian and have no virtue in them. These temptations train our souls to direct our faith away from God and His Christ and so fill our bellies with whatever else would satiate our hunger.

"Where are we to buy bread so these people may eat?" Christ asked. In this text, Christ humbles us and redirects our faith back to Himself so that He may gather His hungry sheep into pastures with green grass, milk, honey, and other fine gifts. Even to the point there are "left-overs." We look to God with thankfulness and praises. Not just to a mere prophet, but to the Christ who redeemed us and won us. If Christ could care for our eternal life by dying on a cross, then how much does He care for our short lives on earth? If He did what He has done for our salvation, do you think He will abandon you in this life? From the right hand of the Father, He cares for us and provides for us, without any merit or worthiness in us. **"Oh give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever!"** (Ps. 106:1)

Oh God, gracious father, You give to the birds of the air and fish of the sea, all creatures their share. Preserve us from the temptations of the Devil that would rather us profane Your holy name. Embolden our faith to recognize that You give to us what is needful for us, even Your precious Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen

“Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy. There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame but on him his crown will shine.” Psalm 132:16-18

Sin made us God’s enemies. Once, because of sin, we were alienated and even hostile to God, doing all sorts of evil deeds (Col. 1:21). Once, sin led us only to consider ourselves in the flesh and so our minds were captivated by concerns of the flesh and not of the things of God (Rom. 8:5). Once, sin led us not to accept the things of the Spirit of God, because they were folly to us, and we didn’t understand it (1 Cor. 2:14). Our crown was once sin that we adorned ourselves in and basked in its luminosity only for it to be shown as nothing but a phantasmic mirage. That *was* our crown.

But from the sprout of David came a Savior of immense power. So much that even though we were once enemies of God, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son and now are saved by our Savior’s life (Rom. 5:10). This anointed one rescued us from the curse of the old crown, He redeemed us from this curse by taking up the curse for us, and hung the crown from another dead tree—the tree of the Cross (Gal. 3:13). A crown exchanged. One of sin and curses for one of life and salvation. This is crown of life is given by Jesus, the Christ, the anointed, to all those who call upon Him. Just as our sins have been forgiven, so too are we also clothed as priests—saints.

Lord God, You anointed Your Son to die on the cross and so pay the entire penalty for our lives as Your enemies. By His death the one cross, He completely suffered the wrath that was to crown our heads. In the joy of the resurrection of our Anointed Lord, grant that we may so shout for joy as clothed saints looking forward to life everlasting as Your adopted children. Amen.

Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.'
Matthew 18:32-35

This week we are discussing that authority given to the Church, that is to Christians in it to forgive sins. Next week we will discuss in particular the calling of pastors to do so. This week however is about all the Church, preachers and hearers. Matthew 18 is helpful in that it addresses how individual Christians are to love and forgive each other in humility, knowing themselves what they have been forgiven by their Master.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant we see the reward of an unforgiving and merciless life. It reflects an unbelieving heart. This is what we learn from our Small Catechism when we learn about the Lord's Prayer and our duty to sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us based on how much God has forgiven us.

This is the pattern of Scripture. Whatever is good or godly comes from God first and then flows out through Christians. Love is first shown by God and then Christians show love. Mercy is first shown by our Father in heaven, and so we are to be merciful. Forgiveness is no different. Because we are forgiven by God, we forgive. And that forgiving of others has the power of God behind it.

The heart which cannot forgive is in a bad spot. A spiritual cancer has begun to rot such a person, and faith will not last long. The Scriptures here remind us that an unforgiving heart towards others is an unbelieving heart in Jesus. That's a harsh warning, but it should cause us to guard against all bitterness toward others.

When given the opportunity to forgive, we ought to count it a privilege to exercise our faith in such a way, showing that we ourselves have been forgiven much and so also that we then forgive. Again, this is all rooted in what God has forgiven us in Christ Jesus.

**Lord Jesus Christ, help us to sincerely forgive others and gladly do good to them.
Amen.**

²³ *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.*” John 20:23

This promise of the connection between heaven and earth is stated three different times (here, Matthew 16, and Matthew 18) to emphasize the many ways in which the authority of forgiveness is wielded in the Church. Such authority was never meant to be a fight between clergy and laity, preachers or hearers, since the three together put the Gospel into the hands of the whole Church.

Jesus Christ has commanded that repentance and the forgiveness of sins be proclaimed throughout the world (see Luke 24:47). As other days have or will point out, this Gospel of the forgiveness of sins is given to all to speak to others. Here in John 20 we see it specifically spoken to the Church, but in regard to pastors. The Church is given to have pastors who serve in the way that Christ commands. This is not so that pastors would be lords in the Church, but servants of Christ for the benefit of the Church.

The Church possesses the office of the keys. Preachers have a specific task within the Church and on behalf of her. Keys unlock and lock. In this case, forgiveness is what is unlocked or locked. And both the unlocking or locking are meant to be done for the good of members of the Church.

Why would the Church through her pastor lock away forgiveness from someone? The goal is to lovingly speak the harsh word of “withholding forgiveness” in order that the sinner would see their sinful condition. It’s hard to believe in our hyper-emotionalized world that such a thing could be done “lovingly”, but in answer to that we need only look to the death of Jesus Christ to see that love can sometimes look harsh.

The goal is of course to use the key that unlocks forgiveness. This is the proper work of God, and so it is the proper work of the Church. Pastors work in areas of church discipline are on behalf of the Church, that indeed as the Large Catechism teaches – everything in the Church be ordered around the forgiveness of sins. Even the harshest speaking of the Law is done so that the Gospel would be proclaimed. Repentance, that is both godly sorrow and true faith in Jesus is what we want for all mankind.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for Your atoning sacrifice, by which You earned our forgiveness. Help us to live lives full of repentance, always hearing and trusting in Your Gospel. Amen.

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” John 20:22-23

Those who say “only God can judge me” have no idea what they are talking about. What they really mean is “I don’t care what *you* say about what God says, I will wait for God to judge me!” The Church has been given the very special authority to forgive sins. That’s the goal, that sinners would receive forgiveness. Christians care about what God says—they fear God’s wrath, they repent, and receive forgiveness. That’s what Christians do. It’s not only a matter of hearing the Devil tempting “did God really say?” but, having heard and *sinned*, where shall we go?

A fool waits until the Last Day to repent. That will be a very scary day for the one who waited. It’s true, God alone judges sin and He forgives sins—but, He has given that power to His Church. God gave the Power of the Keys to the Church as means of divine grace. That is how God chose to deal with you. No matter the grossness of your sins, run to the cross and behold the body on the cross. The blood that drips from Jesus’ side is the power behind this forgiveness.

It is as though Christ has said, “I wish that every repentant sinner would know that I have forgiven them their sins, and that I have given you my Church the power to do it, to speak my words, to give my blessings, to cast the burden from them to me. Because, I have already died for them and atoned for them. But for those who despise this gift, who hate me and my cross, then they will answer to my Father.” The Office of the Keys, the power of the keys, should not be despised or forgotten. This is how God wants to deal with you—this forgiveness, is God’s forgiveness.

“Thy love and grace alone avail to blot out my transgression; the best and holiest deed must fail to break sin’s dread oppression. Before Thee none can bosting stand but all must fear thy strict demand and live alone by mercy.” Amen. (LSB 607:2)

Lord Jesus Christ, keep us humble and penitent for all our days. Help us to encourage others to receive not only the Law which shows our sins, but also the Gospel which brings the forgiveness of our sins. Amen.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.” Acts 20:28

“Pastor, please hear my confession and pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God’s will.” These are your first words when you confess your sins privately to your pastor. It sounds hard and awkward to tell someone else your sins. You could have prayed on your own, confess to God directly, sure, but where you have sinned *personally*, so to do you are greatly blessed to hear the Gospel, *personally*.

What a great and wonderful gift, your pastor is. He is charged by the Holy Spirit to care for the flock which Christ obtained with his own blood. Your pastor is not free to deal with you in any other way than how God has ordained him to do. Your pastor has a duty to be a curator of souls. He uses the tools Christ gave him and apply them to you. To forgive sins, administer the sacrament, and preach the Gospel to you. I once heard it said so well that your pastor’s ear is like the tomb that Christ entered. That is where your sins go, into that tomb, and a rock rolled in front. They died with Christ. You emerge with Christ as something new.

For every sinner that repents, your pastor pronounces forgiveness of sins. What was bound shall be loosed. He uses the Keys of the Kingdom in accordance with God’s good and gracious will. To break and hinder every evil plan of the devil, world, and your sinful nature. You can be certain that God is merciful and will strengthen your faith. The Keys are used under the stead and command of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by His authority your sins are forgiven. This is Christ’s forgiveness. Let it be done for you as you believe. Go in peace.

“Though great our sins, yet greater still is God’s abundant favor; His hand of mercy never will abandon us, nor waver. Our shepherd good and true is He, Who will at last His Israel free from all their sin and sorrow.” (LSB 607:5)

Lord Jesus Christ, make pastors faithful to exercise their office in forgiving sins as You have given to Your Church. Help us to look past all awkwardness in seeking out the greater blessing of Your forgiveness. Amen.

It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. Ecclesiastes 7:5

EXCOMMUNICATION

The word “excommunication” does not come off as warm and inviting. I believe many in our churches assume that excommunication is mean. Jesus’ words “judge not” have been all twisted out of proportion in our time, and therefore the churchly rite of excommunication has fallen out of use nearly everywhere.

If excommunication is mean, then our Lord Jesus is mean. It was our Lord Jesus Himself who gave the church the Office of the Keys, which gives the church authority to bind and loose sins, to forgive and withhold forgiveness. Excommunication is essentially the use of the binding key. It is meant to shock an openly impenitent sinner to his senses, to bring him to repentance, and return him to true fellowship within the Christian congregation.

We fear excommunication, that it would bring shame on our churches. We don’t want to hear about it, for fear it damages the church’s reputation in the community. For this reason, pastors and their congregations shy away from it. This is a powerful lie of the devil. More shameful is where Christian discipline has completely broken down, and the parishes remain in a state of spiritual anarchy. Better would be to accept that congregations have sinners and excommunication is needed from time to time. We don’t have to take joy in it, but we realize that Jesus has given it for a purpose.

A commonly neglected Christian virtue is the willingness to be admonished and corrected by a brother Christian. We simply don’t preach about this enough. The Psalmist writes, **“Let a righteous man strike me – it is a kindness; let him rebuke me – it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it” (Psalm 141:5).** They are incredible words. King David calls this correction a kindness, even oil for his head. They are completely counter-cultural words in our day. We bristle at small critique, and then we take overwhelming offense at pointed correction. This is no Christian attitude. Reviving the words of Psalm 141 in our congregations will be a huge challenge but can only bring great blessing.

God give us the humility to receive correction, the boldness to give it, and ultimate trust in the power of the absolution, which takes all sin away.

Lord Jesus Christ, grant us humility to receive correction, boldness to give it, and trust in Your Word of absolution. Amen.



Jesus threatened with stoning (John 8)

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 8:46-59

[Jesus said,] “Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” John 8:47-51

This week we consider the last question in the fifth chief part of Luther’s Small Catechism: “What do you believe according to these words?” To ask this question assumes that you do, in fact, believe that the words of Jesus are true and apply to you. Such faith is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, as we confess earlier in the catechism: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

Jesus Himself testified to the Jews, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” Until the Holy Spirit works faith in you through the hearing of the Gospel, you believe nothing according to Jesus’ words. Just the opposite: His words are folly to you, and you are not able to understand them.

But because the Holy Spirit has been given to you through the means of grace, and because He has created and sustained faith in your Lord Jesus Christ, you believe according to His Word that absolution is valid and certain, even in heaven, just as if He had dealt with you Himself. If You keep this and all His Words by faith, you will never see death.

Lord Jesus, grant us faith by Your Holy Spirit to believe Your holy Word of absolution and keep it, that we may never see death but inherit eternal life. Amen.

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Let those who fear the LORD say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. Psalm 118:1-5

Strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts. The first part is contrition, which is sorrow over sin. The Law of God works contrition when it speaks its message of condemnation and terrifies the sinner's conscience. When we are brought face-to-face with the unyielding demands of the holy and almighty God and our complete and total failure to keep any of those demands, how can we feel anything but distress? All we know and feel in that hour is the terrible anger of God.

But the second part of repentance is faith in Jesus Christ. When the Law has done its work of accusing sinners of their transgressions, the Gospel ought to be proclaimed to convicted sinners in their distress. The Gospel speaks of the free and full forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake, who suffered and died on the cross for the sins of the whole world. Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. When we hear this word of comfort and hope and peace with God, how can we feel anything but joy and thanksgiving? By faith we know that the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Holy absolution is the particular application of the Gospel to troubled sinners. When those who repent of their sins and want to do better are absolved by the called ministers of Christ, the Lord truly answers their call and sets them free.

Gracious and merciful God, we give You thanks for Your steadfast love shown to us poor sinners in the Person of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us and in whose name we are forgiven all our sins. Amen.

[Jesus said,] “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Matthew 16:13-28

Our Lord Jesus gave the Keys of the kingdom of heaven to His Church on earth that sins be bound to those who are openly unrepentant and be loosed from those who repent of their sins and want to do better. Peter, on behalf of the Church, did not receive the Keys in order establish an earthly kingdom or empire, nor to establish new human traditions and services, but to do exactly what Jesus commanded: forgive the sins of repentant sinners but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? What good is the Christian Church on earth if she is no different from the kingdoms of the world, seeking earthly glory, honor, power, and wealth? What is the point of the Office of the Ministry if those who possess it are no more than judges and arbitrators over temporal affairs? To paraphrase St. Paul, if the Church and her ministers are concerned about this world only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has established his Holy Christian Church on earth and the Office of the Ministry therein to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the Sacraments. Built on the Rock who is Christ, doing what He has given her to do, the gates of hell shall never prevail against Christ's Church.

O Lord, grant us faithful ministers who will exercise the Office of the Keys in Your Church according to Your will for the forgiveness of our sins. Amen.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." John 20:19-23

In the Divine Service, the pastor holds the very Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ before the congregation and declares, "The peace of the Lord be with you always." This reflects our risen Lord's appearance to His apostles on the first Easter evening long ago. On that night Jesus showed them His crucified body now raised and said, "Peace be with you."

These two things are inseparable for us Christians: the crucified and risen Body of Christ and the peace of God which is ours in Him. Apart from His death and resurrection, we have no peace with God; in fact, we are enemies of Him and doomed to eternal separation from Him. But thanks be to God, by the death of His Son we are reconciled to God, and since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they stand before us and absolve us of our sins, this is just as valid and certain as if we had been sitting in that locked room with the disciples on Easter, seeing the Risen Christ and His holy wounds with our own eyes, hearing with our own ears those blessed and comforting words, "Peace be with you."

Praise be to You, O Christ, for by Your death and resurrection You have won peace for us, peace that is delivered to us in Holy absolution. Amen.

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

The scribes and Pharisees once asked, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” To be sure, every sin is ultimately a sin against God. As God alone has the authority to establish His Law, so also, He alone has the authority to condemn and forgive sinners.

What they failed to recognize, however, is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and possesses in His very Nature all the divine attributes. Therefore, He has the authority to forgive sins and declare sinners righteous. Furthermore, Christ our Lord has willed to give such authority to men. He has given this to His church on earth, and in His stead and by His command the called ministers of Christ exercise this authority in the Christian congregation.

Pastors are called to minister among us faithfully with God’s holy Word and blessed Sacraments. They are to instruct us in the faith, to forgive our sins, to minister to the sick and dying, to demonstrate a ministry centered in the Gospel, and to admonish and encourage us to confidence in Christ and holy living. By faith, therefore, we should regard our pastors as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, hearing the Word they proclaim until together with them we receive our commendation from God when Christ comes again in glory.

Almighty God, thank You for the gift of our pastors. Grant them Your Holy Spirit that they may minister among us as faithful stewards until Your Son comes again in glory. Amen.

[Jesus said,] “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” Luke 10:16

When the pastor absolves our sins, he does in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus and by His authority. Therefore, we should not regard our pastor in his office according to himself, his personality, his looks, his abilities, or any other earthly personal characteristics. Instead, we should consider him according to what Christ our dear Lord said to the seventy-two that He sent out: **“The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me.”**

When the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine authority, that is, according to the Gospel, they deal with us by divine right. This includes “the authority to forgive sins, to judge doctrine, to reject doctrines contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the Church wicked people, whose wickedness is known.” (Augsburg Confession XXVIII:21) They exercise this authority not by bodily force or strength, but by the Word of God alone.

This does not mean that we should blindly hear and obey our pastors. We must always consider their words and deeds in light of what God has spoken in His holy Word, and if anything they teach or establish is contrary to the Word, than we must not follow them, for we must obey God rather than man.

But when the ministry of our pastors is carried out in accordance with what Christ has spoken in His Word, then we must, as a matter of necessity, receive them with respect and high regard, obeying them and submitting to their authority, which ultimately is not theirs but Christ’s, for “the one who hears you hears me.” If we believe these words of Jesus, then we will receive our pastors’ ministry of Word and Sacrament as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

Lord Jesus, grant us faith to receive our pastors in Your Name, that their work among us may be a joy. Amen.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. Romans 5:12

DOES ABSOLUTION REMOVE EARTHLY CONSEQUENCES?

Sometimes Christians mistakenly believe that the forgiveness of sins means that earthly consequences for sin should be removed.

This contradicts plain reason. We know that sinful violence can result in injury, sometimes permanent bodily handicap or even death. Secular courts try criminals and issue their sentences. They continue their work as God's avenger on the wrongdoer even when the Christian absolution is applied.

It contradicts Scripture too. Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, and the earth has never been the same. St. Paul elaborates, **"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).** That we age and finally die is a consequence of sin which no man can escape. We thank God that his final verdict on us is not a matter of wages, but a declaration based on free grace.

Earthly consequences for sin are reality. We can pray to God that he would minimize the earthly fallout when we sin, but we don't know the specific ways in which he will answer. Faithful Christians ought to be thankful for an even greater gift, that the eternal consequences for sin have been removed for us. We will enjoy eternal fellowship with God because of what our Savior has done for us. Earthly consequences for sin right now pale in comparison to the glory which awaits us.

There is good news for sinners while on this earth also. If you do sin and must suffer for it, your pastor who announces the absolution on you will stand by you. If you lose friends and lose trust, your pastor will support you as you carve a new path ahead. His final word is not one of judgment, but of grace, and this is true every time. He wants to see you succeed and realize that God's grace is always sufficient, even when our own sins bring us discomfort. God can bring healing in unexpected ways. The absolution does not work like magic that way. That is only our own design or wish for it. God's purposes are greater than we know, and he works out his marvelous will for forgiven sinners in his due time.

Lord Jesus, help us to believe Your Word rightly and to trust in Your forgiveness even if we must sometimes suffer here on our own account because of our sins. Amen.



Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21)

“I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” And they said, “What is that to us? You see to it!”
Matthew 27:4

The traditional reading for Palm Sunday is the passion account of St. Matthew. Matthew is the only gospel writer who records the fate of Judas Iscariot. This text today reminds us of how important the office of the keys is.

Judas Iscariot followed the trial of Jesus closely. And when He saw His Rabbi condemned, the Fifth Commandment cut his heart. Judas was stricken by the Law of God and it terrified him. The verse before says that Judas “regretted” or was “remorseful.” Here, we see the contrition which the Law of God works in our hearts. By the Law comes the knowledge of sin. And Judas had sinned greatly. He betrayed the Son of God. He was complicit in the murder of His Master. He used a kiss, the sign of respect and love, to hurt and betray.

In order to relieve his wounded conscience, Judas went to the priests. They were no help. They led him down this path and they were now indifferent to his sufferings. They didn’t care about Judas; he was merely a tool, to be discarded. What noble leadership! What caring shepherds these rascals were! May God preserve us from such callous pastors!

Finding no help among the clergy, Judas attempted to return the money. He threw the money into the temple, hoping that his conscience might be salved by returning the money. But it is not enough. No donation can blot out sin. No work can redeem the conscience from dead works.

Judas was sorry; but that’s not enough. Without the gospel, we men must despair like Judas because there is only death and hell for us. But through the gospel, we have a rich redemption from the great prison of sin.

Lord Jesus, send us true preachers to forgive us our sins, so that we might not perish in despair like Judas, but that we might be forever saved. Amen.



Anointing of Jesus (John 12)

“His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him.”

John 12:16

Each gospel writer recorded the Triumphal entry for us because this event revealed the nature of our King. He did not come in power or in splendor, but in humility and meekness. We understand this.

But the people of Jesus' day did not understand this. They say the right words, but they fail to grasp their meaning. They cry, “Hosanna,” which means, “Save!” They sing Psalm 118 with joy because the great Jubilee has come. They place their clothes on the ground so that the foal will not have contact with the soil. Haggai 2:9 is fulfilled; God has been merciful to His people in their distress. They exalt Jesus. They confess Him as Savior. But they do not get it. Not even the disciples get it.

But Christ accepts their homage anyway. He, Who refused to be a bread king, now willingly received the titles of kingship. He did this because His hour had come. His mission was nearly complete. The hour of His glorification, that is, His death on the cross, was at hand. His final victory over the ruler of this world, the devil, was about to occur. And even the Greeks were now coming to our Lord, wishing to see and hear Him.

The people were foolish and slow of heart. They were dull in their hearts and minds. And so are we. But Jesus receives our homage anyway. He still comes to us, telling us not to fear. He bears with our foolishness and our ignorance, as He bore with His own disciples. And He forgives us our foolishness through another humble instrument: his called and ordained servants of the Word.

Lord Jesus, You received the homage of those who did not understand what they were saying and doing. You bore with them mercifully and with patience. Bear with us, enlighten our minds, so that we might know that these things were written about You and that these things were done to You for our salvation. Amen.



Jesus finds the disciples asleep (Mark 14)

“So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!” Mark 15:39

We read this climax of the crucifixion and it often slides over us. We really don't see how powerful the centurion's confession is until we look at the rest of Mark. In Mark 1:24, Mark 1:34, Mark 3:11, Mark 5:7, we see that Jesus is called the Son of God by demons. It is the demons, not man, who make the clearest confession of who Jesus really is. They clearly proclaim Jesus to be God's Son.

But Jesus tells them to be quiet. Why? Demons cannot tell us who Jesus really is. Science cannot tell us who Jesus really is. Our emotions cannot tell us who Jesus really is. Jesus cannot and will not be known in these ways. Look at how people try to get to heaven to know God, and, like the mythological Bellerophon, they come crashing to earth.

The centurion makes the great confession. Why? This hardened veteran, recognizes and confesses Who Jesus really is: He is the Son of God. The centurion didn't see Jesus' miracles. The centurion didn't hear Jesus' preaching and teaching in the temple. So, what tuned the centurion in?

The text says that the centurion uttered this wonderful confession when Jesus “breathed His last.” It was Jesus' death that caused the centurion to utter these words. It was Jesus' bleeding and twitching corpse that moved this hardened, callous veteran to the best and clearest confession of Who Jesus is in the gospel of Mark.

You can only know Christ through His benefits of forgiveness, life, and salvation. His benefits come through the Word and the Sacraments. And the Word and the Sacraments are founded upon the death of Jesus. It is only when we see the bleeding and dying God can we too say: This truly was the Son of God.

Heavenly Father, no one can come to You except by Christ and Him Crucified. Strengthen our faith in Your Son's death, so that we too might make the good confession. Amen.



Judas agrees to betray Jesus (Luke 22)

“And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’” Luke 23:43

Many misguided Christians try to use the thief on the cross as a way to get around the necessity of baptism. The argument goes, “Look! Jesus promised the thief on the cross salvation! He wasn’t baptized. Therefore, baptism is not necessary.”

These people commit the fallacy of hasty generalization. They don’t consider all the evidence. They rightly point out that Christian baptism hadn’t been instituted yet. But this man was more than likely a Jew. That means he was circumcised, a member of the Old Testament church. This man may have even been baptized by John in the Jordan River. We don’t know. Because of fallacious arguments, they end up speaking against God’s wonderful gift of holy baptism.

What the thief on the cross does prove is that it is possible for a dying, evil man to repent and be saved. This man was dying. The bloody holes in his hands and feet wouldn’t kill him. No, this thief was suffocating. Crucifixion was a slow and painful suffocation, which happened over several days. That’s why the Romans would later break the legs of this man and his fellow thief, so that they would suffocate more quickly.

The thief’s breath was ragged and labored. And yet, he found the strength to rebuke his vile partner for his blasphemous words. He found the breath to make a bold and trusting confession of sin and faith.

A confession of sin and the confession of faith. This is what the thief on the cross did. He believed in Christ and all his sins were forgiven. If he was a Jew, he became a true son of Abraham, not only by blood but also by faith. His circumcision, so long ignored and spurned, became a source of comfort and joy.

Dear Christians, the door of grace has not closed for you. No matter how sinful you are, no matter what you have done, Christ’s words apply to you as much as it did to the blessed thief: “Today you will be with Me in paradise.”

Lord Jesus, let the history of the thief be our comfort as we lay dying. Amen.



The Lord's Supper from a 1558 Book of Luther's Sermons

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”

John 13:1

John’s gospel doesn’t include the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Instead, the Holy Spirit fills up all of the gaps of that blessed night. In John, we hear Jesus’ valedictory address to His disciples. We also see how our Lord teaches the disciples how to love through the example of foot washing.

Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper because He loved His disciples and because He loves us. He loved us so much that He desired to give us a pledge of His love. Eating Jesus’ body and drinking His blood is a proof that our God became Man and suffered all manner of indignity and evil on our behalf.

Jesus spoke to His disciples at length because He loved us. He speaks about how He and His Father are one. He tells them that He goes ahead to prepare a place for them in heaven. He not only comforts them with the promise of prayer, but also prays for them Himself. Jesus speaks to them because He loves them, and He speaks these words because He loves us.

Jesus gave the disciples and us an example of love. When Jesus washed their feet, He became the lowest, the servant. In this way, He accomplished our salvation. And, because He loved us first, we love Him and one another. So, are we to wash one another’s feet? No. We are to serve one another humbly. If we would be the greatest, we must become the slave. In this way, Jesus taught the disciples and us to love one another.

Jesus loved the disciples when they were in the world. Jesus loves us who are now in the world. And He loves us to the end. He loved us all the way to the cross. And He shall love us until He comes in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Lord Jesus, thank You for giving us an example of self-sacrificing love and for giving us Your blessed Sacrament. Amen.



The Crucifixion of Jesus By Lucas Cranach the Elder

“Now it was Caiaphas who advised the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.” John 18:14

Good Friday is a peculiarly English expression, and it is a good one for us to remember. When we call this day “Good Friday,” we reflect on the joy of our glorious redemption. It is finished. If we are shrouded in funereal unhappiness, then we are doing it wrong. Today is a day of most high and solemn praise. Indeed, just look at our beautiful Lutheran hymns. Hymns of Lutheran origin do not bewail the sufferings of Christ but rather solemnly rejoice that “with His stripes we are healed.”

Today, however, is not a day of unrestrained frivolity. No one should be making jokes or taking the death of God’s Son lightly. This is a serious time, when we deeply and truly reflect on how much our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, loves us from before the foundation of the world.

John 18:14 reveals this fact to us: “Now it was Caiaphas who advised the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.” It is so beautiful to see that even the enemies of the Lord accomplish His will! Earlier in the Gospel of John, we see that Caiaphas, the High Priest, spoke by the Holy Spirit, even though he was an unbeliever. The Holy Spirit spoke through Caiaphas’ office as high priest. And here in chapter 18, Caiaphas’ prophecy comes true.

It is better that one Man should die for the people, lest the whole nation perish! While Caiaphas meant it for evil, God our Father used this for good. One Man would die for the people. It wasn’t to save them from Roman spears, but it was to save them from their sins and from everlasting torture in hell. This is very good for us, since we see that no enemy of Christ will thwart His desire to accomplish our salvation. No one and nothing shall separate us from the Love of Christ!

Lord Jesus, You died so that Your people might live. Help us to believe that You work all things together for the good of those who love You. Amen.



Crucifixion and Open Tomb

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. Acts 20:28

WHY PRIVATE CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION?

If the general absolution announced on Sunday is truly an absolution, why should I confess my sins to the pastor? It seems like a risky venture. It seems like an opportunity to reveal your shame and risk this man talking about it, while nothing special is actually gained. And if you already enjoy a close relationship to your pastor, you don't want to let him down either. It seems like Private Confession and Absolution isn't worth the risk.

So why do it? Christians should know first of all that pastors vow at their ordination not to divulge the sins confessed to them. Fidelity to their office requires this.

Your pastor is not going to be shocked by what you confess either. A good pastor is prepared to hear confessions 24/7, whether in casual conversation or in the confessional. It is his life's calling. He is also a sinner too, who struggles with his own flesh and knows what it is capable of. There is nothing new under the sun, and there is no sin which is too great for the blood of Jesus to cover. Because he won't be shocked by what you confess, he isn't going to be interested in spreading it around.

Psalms 103 says, **“as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12)**. Your pastor believes these words. In the absolution your sin is removed, and there is simply no reason to go around talking about it.

And your pastor's usefulness to you goes beyond simply mouthing the absolution. He is equipped to give you counsel moving ahead. He is a resource to you. He is a confidant who will stick by you if others refuse to offer forgiveness themselves. Modern society trains us to run to the therapist or pharmaceuticals when we struggle with the fallout of our sins. These things may be useful occasionally, but the local pastor is too often an underutilized resource, one who is even right in front of your nose.

To confess your sins to your pastor makes no sense to worldly logic, but it is another example of worldly wisdom falling short. It is a positive and healthy thing for Christians to do.

Lord Jesus, help us to make use of Your gift of private absolution. Amen.



The Empty Tomb

The Resurrection of our Lord - Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8

And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." Mark 16:6-7

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Today we gather with our brothers and sisters in the faith, that is our closest family as eternity sees it, to rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus. Today we will also likely feast on sumptuous food and break the Lenten fast. Today is a great day for all Christians.

Throughout this Lenten journey we have learned much about confession and absolution. This is to say we have learned much about what our Lord Jesus Christ earned on Good Friday (full forgiveness for us) and also how He wants that forgiveness to be delivered to us over and over again (Word and Sacrament). Absolution is one of those sacred ways promised by Jesus. Jesus has ascribed power to the words of forgiveness.

In today's Gospel lesson we find much about words that are to be spoken. The angel tells women at the tomb about what has happened to Jesus, who was crucified. He is risen. Death, the final enemy of mankind could not keep Jesus. It had no claim on Him. Jesus, in earning the forgiveness of sin has undone the fruit of sin that is called death. On Good Friday we heard Jesus say "It is finished" and today we learn in His resurrection that yes it is – it's confirmed that "Jesus lives, the victory's won". And we gather to hear the news and to celebrate what Jesus has done.

The women are told by the angel to tell the disciples of what has happened. Far from being a verse used to support the heresy of women's ordination, this is a great verse teaching of how each Christian may speak the Gospel to others. Yes, the ministry of the Word through pastors is also indicated here in the word that will be given to the Apostles to speak. For more on that, go to Church next Sunday.

Lord Jesus Christ, we give You thanks for earning our forgiveness, being raised from the dead to confirm Your victory, and for allowing simple words to bring that forgiveness to us here and now. May we always believe them. Amen.



Confession and Absolution
1558 Small Catechism