

Wednesday in Laetare
Text: John 20:19-23 (Holy Absolution)
Trinity Lutheran, Worden, IL & Zion Lutheran, Carpenter, IL
Pastor H. R. Curtis

✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

✠In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠

Tonight we explore the Fifth Chief Part of Luther's Small Catechism regarding Confession & Absolution. And as you were reading the Catechism aloud tonight you may have caught yourself thinking: "Did I wander in to the wrong church tonight? Isn't this Trinity *Lutheran* Church? But here in the Catechism it sounds like Luther is telling me to go to my pastor privately and confess my sins and receive absolution. I thought that's what Roman Catholics did?" If that was your response, you are not alone. That was certainly my first response when I heard of this as well.

Like most of you I did not grow up with Private Confession & Absolution. It simply wasn't a part of the spiritual life at the Lutheran parish where I was raised. Like you, I learned about Private Confession from the movies and TV: you walk into a dark booth and kneel down and say "Father forgive me, for I have sinned. . . ." Then the Roman priest hears the confession and tells you go to out and say a few Hail Mary's and Our Father's and that's that. That's what I thought Private Confession was. And I certainly knew that we Lutherans don't do that.

And we don't. The Roman Catholic use of Private Confession is, I'm afraid, unbiblical and obscures the word of Christ. In the Roman Church they speak of Confession having three parts. First, your feeling of repentance and sadness over sin – called Contrition. You show your contrition by confessing yours sins – which must be listed exactly. Second, the absolution is given by the priest. He pronounces Christ's forgiveness for sins confessed. Third, however, in the Roman system is satisfaction. You've got to go forth now and do some list of good works given to you by the priest to work off the temporal punishment your sins have earned so that you can get it over with now and not have to go to Purgatory for as long as you would have had to.

Obviously, this is not a Gospel-focused, evangelical-Lutheran way of doing things. We believe that Christ covers all our sins and the punishments they have incurred for us. If we are forgiven by Christ, then we are fully forgiven. There is no amount of satisfaction, or good works, which can add to the forgiveness he gives us. We are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. And our sanctification will be made full on the Last Day when Christ brings to completion the salvation he won for us. The notion of Purgatory is an extra-biblical and unbiblical invention which clouds this free gift of Christ. Ever since the Reformation we have been earnestly praying that the Lord would show this truth to our Roman Catholic brethren.

So it is not the Roman system of private Confession that Scripture and our Catechism teach. But make no mistake, our Catechism does teach private Confession and Absolution – in the biblical and evangelical way. First there is the biblical foundation. Christ comes to his disciples, breathes on them, gives them his Holy Spirit and says, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of anyone, they are retained." These are the words of Christ. There is no getting around them. The Catechism says what we believe according to these words, "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."

Thus the Absolution pronounced by a called and ordained minister of Christ, that is an ordained pastor, is the real thing – by the power of Christ's Word it really brings forgiveness. But there is also the flip side: those sins that are retained are likewise retained by the same power of Christ's Word. Thus, for a pastor to pronounce this powerful Word of Christ, for him to be faithful to what the Lord Jesus has commanded him to do, he must have some basis of making the decision to forgive or retain the sin. For there are two paths that Christ gives us in his Word: a sin is either forgiven or it is retained. If a pastor sees repentance and trust in the

Lord he pronounces forgiveness in accordance with Christ's Word; if he sees impenitence and rejection of the Lord, he pronounces the retention of sins in accordance with Christ's Word.

From this it is easy to see the need for a relationship between the pastor and the penitent. Just as we don't walk down busy streets with squirt guns baptizing anybody who comes along (how easy evangelism would be if that were the case!), so also we don't indiscriminately pronounce this specific absolution in the form of "As a called and ordained servant of Christ, by his command and in his stead, I forgive you all your sins" to anybody who comes along. We always preach the general Gospel message to all the world, to anybody who will listen. We always say to all people, "Christ died for you! He provides salvation from your sins! There is no need for you to die in those sins. Trust in Christ and you will be forgiven. To those who believe on his name he gives the power to become the sons of God and promises them his Holy Spirit. He who believes and is baptized will be saved. So repent, believe on the Lord Jesus, and be baptized!" We always preach that to anybody who will listen and even to a few who won't! But the specific comfort, the zeroed-in bullseye of forgiveness that comes with the statement: By the command and in the stead of Christ, I forgive you, personally, specifically, of all your sins – that kind of direct, personal forgiveness is for Christian folk who are baptized and repentant of all their sins and is thus best utilized in a personal, private setting.

And that is the biblical reasoning behind private confession and absolution. That's why it's in the Small Catechism. It's a Gospel thing – like Baptism and the Lord's Supper through Absolution comes the forgiveness of sins. When I was more thoroughly taught the Small Catechism during my ministerial studies, I was confronted with this head on. I knew that at my ordination I would be placed into this Office of Christ the duty of which is to forgive and retain sins. I knew that I would have to take the vow never to divulge the sins confessed to me for any reason (all those silly TV shows that agonize over the priest or pastor and the criminal case: will the priest testify against the criminal because of what he heard in confession? – all those shows are just ridiculous. We have no choice. We took a solemn oath. A sin confessed may never, never, never be divulged for any reason. Period. A sin confessed dies in the pastor's ear because he is there only to act in Christ's stead and by his command.). Therefore, I knew that I had to myself become a penitent, I had to go to confession myself.

It took me a while to get up the nerve. It was scary. I wasn't used to it. I hadn't grown up with it. It was different. It was hard to be that honest. I found in speaking my sins aloud that I had been lying to myself about their seriousness. It was hard to vocalize my weakness and my sin. As we read tonight in the Small Catechism, we do not have to agonize over thinking of every little sin – we sin so much we don't know about it! A general confession, like the one we all say

together at the beginning of service, is just fine. But we are encouraged to especially confess those specific sins which weigh on our conscience, or which we can't seem to shake. Those sins we worry about. Can God really forgive that? Sure, I know there is this general forgiveness out there. But what about that thing I did that no one else knows about? I'm so ashamed of it. Is it really forgiven? I, at any rate, had plenty of sins like that. I needed that assurance. So I went. I confessed. And then I heard something I had never heard before. The forgiveness of Christ directed right at me, personally, even with full knowledge of the evil I was and had done. The pastor rose, placed his hands on my head, and said "Heath, by the command and in the stead of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." I will never forget that feeling of comfort, that voice with Christ's authority speaking to me in my sin, those tears of joy in the forgiveness of the Lord.

It is for this reason, the sake of the Gospel, the Absolution, the forgiveness that we Lutherans have always practiced private confession and absolution – not always as widely as we should have, but we have always practiced it. It is for this reason, for the personal Gospel message, that I cherish private confession and absolution and that's why it has become a key part to the spiritual life of my family. Rebekah and I go to confession about once a month, and though we both grew up not having private confession and absolution, we cannot now imagine our spiritual

lives without it. So I encourage you to think these things over. This Sunday we will speak more of this in Bible Class. Come and hear more and ask questions. If you are anything like me, it will take you a while to wrestle with what the Catechism is teaching. But you will not be disappointed in the gifts the Lord gives. He laid down his life for you on the cross and he brings you the forgiveness he earned for you there in Baptism, in Absolution, and in the Holy Supper. If you are weak and burdened with sin as I am, seek this gift wherever he offers it. Indeed, let us now hasten to our Lord's Supper where his forgiveness, life and salvation is also given to us. For our Lord is rich in mercy. He comes to forgive us in so many ways.

✠In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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