

Sermon — 08/21/22
(The Absolution)

Text — Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in
Christ God forgave you..

Theme — “Who Needs a Hug?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years back, while doing a communion call with one of our shut-in members, she and I had just finished reciting the confession of sins. And before I spoke the Absolution, I told her that THIS was my favorite part: telling sinners that they were indeed forgiven. All because of what Christ Jesus had done for them (and me). She smiled and agreed: there is NOTHING better than hearing that. Because until that forgiveness is applied and made MINE, it really is nothing more than mere information. But once it is given — to ME, a poor miserable sinner — then heaven is wide open. Like baptism and reception of the Lord’s Supper, the absolution is an intensely personal thing. YOU are washed clean in baptism. YOU eat and drink the Body and Blood of the Lord, for YOUR forgiveness. YOU are absolved and forgiven, all of your sins. YOU. These things make what Christ did your own.

Every time I visited that woman after that (and it was quite a few times, over the course of the years prior to her death), she would smile when we got to the Absolution and remind me that THIS was the best part. That precious woman has gone to be with the Lord for several years now, but I always hold those memories dear to me. And I have shared them with others — especially during other shut-in calls — and it always has the same effect: the joy — the unbounded, unfettered joy — of knowing that MY sins are forgiven. Because of what Jesus has done. Because of what the Holy Spirit gives. Because

the Father has sent this man, this pastor, this poor miserable sinner himself, to speak that forgiveness to ME.

Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all of your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You hear those words all the time. But how often do we ponder them? Take them to heart? Meditate on what is really being said there? Well, we will do just that today, as we continue our look at the catechism. (pause)

The first thing we notice here is that this Absolution is predicated upon — it follows and depends upon — the Confession. Suffice it to say, that Confession is an admission of our sin and guilt. Of our inability to fix it. Of our deserved punishment, now and eternally. But also, of our hope and trust in the work of Christ to pay that price for us by His life/death/resurrection. There is absolutely nothing in us that merits or deserves forgiveness. Our only hope is in God's grace, in our Savior Jesus Christ. THAT is our confession.

And so, all that the pastor speaks in the Absolution is based upon that. For those who do NOT make that confession — denying either their own sin, or the saving work of Jesus — to those people, the following words do not apply. To them, there is no forgiveness. Because either they are saying they do not need it (and so reject the gift won and offered), or because they deny the One who wants them to have it. That Confession, then, is necessary for the Absolution.

But the Confession exists only for the sake of the Absolution. That is, we confess our sin so that we might be forgiven. We confess Christ for the sake of His gifts. And that is what the Absolution confers and gives. And God gives those gifts — that forgiveness and peace and grace — through the

office of pastor! How utterly amazing! And, to some, how offensive. After all, who is HE to speak for God? Who is HE to forgive sins? Who is HE to claim be standing in God's "stead"?

Good questions. Appropriate questions. Necessary questions. For the pastor certainly is no better than the congregation. He too is a poor, miserable sinner. Indeed, he has just confessed that, right along with the rest of the people. A pastor is not "above" anyone, based on his own morality or goodness or faith. He needs that Absolution just as badly as anyone else in the room. So, why does he speak these precious and life-giving words? Because of his office.

Now, that is an awesome and huge responsibility. The congregation — God's dear children — are to see and hear their Father in him. What he says and does must reflect and share what God says and does. When the pastor speaks, it needs to be only what the Lord says. Now, no pastor is good enough for that — certainly **I** am not good enough. And yet, because of God's grace, He (and you accept) the pastor's weakness and frailty and failings, and see the Lord at work in/through him. When the pastor baptizes, it is God who washes clean. When the pastor preaches, it is God who is heard. When the pastor communes, it is the Lord's Supper and not his own. And when the pastor absolves, it God who forgives. But the Lord does all this, using the pastor's mouth and hand. That work of God, using this called servant, is the pastoral office.

I always tell the students in confirmation class to pay attention to which way the pastor faces. When he faces the altar (as he does for the Confession), he is speaking with/for the people — he is their voice to God. But when he turns and faces the congregation (as he does for the Absolution), then he is speaking for God to His holy people. So, when the pastor speaks the Absolution, it is really GOD who is speaking. The pastor is merely the voice He uses. And what is conferred and given in that Absolution comes — not from the pastor — but from God. HE is the source, the Giver, of all that follows. And, oh, what great and heavenly things follow! (pause)

First, the pastor “announces” the grace of God. And what is that? It is the Gospel, pure and simple. That, despite our sins, God STILL loves us. That, in His infinite/almighty love, He has sent His Son to be our Savior. That He has picked up our sin. That He has paid the price, suffering our punishment for us. That He has done literally **everything** to reconcile and reunite God and man. It IS all completed for us, by Jesus Christ. And so, He has kept the commandments — for us. He has suffered hell — for us. He has risen from the grave to open heaven — for us. We deserve none of that. And yet, God does it. Because of His grace, His mercy, His love.

To “announce” that grace is the essence and core of the pastor’s office. To teach and preach the Gospel. To remind you of that saving love, over and over again, week after week. To never let you forget it. **That** is what a pastor is called to do. And so, when the pastor makes that turn following the Confession to face the congregation for the Absolution, he is doing it once again. Here it comes: the Gospel. For YOU.

And the pastor is saying all this, remember, “in the stead and by the command” of his Lord Jesus Christ. It is not Steve Bohler, then, who is saying this — it is Christ Himself! **That** is why you believe it. After all, if it was just MY words, then why would anyone believe them? I am a weak and wobbly support. I am often wrong (just ask Lisa!). But what the pastor says next comes directly from Christ Himself. So, listen up!

And what does Christ say to you? That you — YOU! — are forgiven. ALL your sins. Not just the “little” ones. Not just the ones you can recollect. Not just the ones that others may know about. But ALL of them! The big ones too — the ones that weigh heavily on your heart and soul. The ones that the devil likes to parade before you late at night, telling you that they are just too much to ever be forgiven. The ones that you seem to slip and fall into doing, over and over again, despite your best efforts and intentions. They are forgiven! The sins which maybe you have forgotten, or perhaps even never even

knew you had committed — the words or deeds that hurt another without your intention or knowledge; the people you have failed to help because you were too blind to see them; the sins which you forgot because you sin so much each day that can't even keep track of them all. They are forgiven! The secret sins that you try so hard to hide from everyone — the things that you are so embarrassed to have done or said or even thought. They are forgiven! All of them. Every sin. It is ALL paid for and forgiven in the work of Christ for you. THAT is what Jesus is reassuring you about in the Absolution. No sin — and no sinner — is left out of that sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Wow! Are there any words more precious than those?

And to make sure that you hear those words — again and again, week after week — God has instituted the pastoral office. He has sent to you — YOU — His servant. That is why you have a pastor. Not to be a social director for the congregation. Or a fund-raiser. Or an executive officer. But a forgiver of sins. A spokesman of the Gospel. A human hand to wash sinners clean in baptism. A human tongue to preach the Good News. A human voice to invite rebellious children home to their Father. A fellow sinner, sharing what he has received in God's grace. And here, in the Absolution, is just one more example of that. (pause)

And then, to drive that forgiveness home, to remind you that it truly IS all for you, this Absolution is given “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. Now, that is baptismal talk. Those were the words spoken over you when you were made God's child at the font, when you were washed clean in the blood of the Lamb and clothed with His righteousness. So, when the pastor announces this forgiveness “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, he is pointing you right back to your baptism.

In fact, Lutheran theologians often speak of Confession/Absolution as simply a return to baptism. A repeat of the cleansing given you there. And it is. When you hear that Absolution, you are

just as clean and holy and renewed as when you were first baptized. Like a new-born baby, you are pure and innocent — because Christ’s forgiveness rests upon you. The Absolution, like baptism, recreates and restores you. Everything Christ has done is given to you here. Again. (pause)

All of that is why (as I said to that dear saint that day in a shut-in call) THIS is my favorite part of the service. Because the Absolution IS the Gospel. For me. For you. Yes, you ARE a sinner, as we say in the Confession. But God does **not** cast you aside or consign you to hell. No, He **loves** you. With a love so strong that not sin, not death, not even the devil could overcome it. And so, He comes for you. He came 2000 years ago in the flesh: as that Baby of Bethlehem in the manger; as that Man of Sorrows, nailed to the cross; as that Risen Lord at Easter’s tomb. And He came for you when He washed you clean of all your sins in baptism. But He also comes for you today, when that Gospel is preached, when He feeds you with His Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper. And He comes too when, in the Absolution, He tells you — through the mouth of a pastor — that you (YOU!) are forgiven. All of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It truly IS the best, isn’t it? Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS — Nicene Creed

FE — Offertory/Offering