

Healing Through Confession and Absolution

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading. **And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”** Here ends the text.

There was a long discussion at the Ladies Aid meeting one night at St. Martin Lutheran Church. The ladies were discussing buying new par aments for the altar. Some thought the par aments had seen better days while others thought they were still fine. They looked at their budget and what new par aments would cost. They discussed how they might make up the difference. After much debate it was pointed out that elderly Mrs. Johnson, who had given the existing par aments as a memorial, was still living and able to attend church. No sense in upsetting her. The ladies finally voted to table the matter, to be revisited later, pending either an influx of funds or the departure of Mrs. Johnson to the kingdom of glory.

After the meeting was adjourned, Joann lingered next to the Ladies Aid president until the other ladies had left. She said, “You know, Betty, I didn’t want to say anything during the meeting, but if funds are an issue, I think my husband and I would be glad to donate the money for the new par aments.” Betty replied, “Well I think the ladies wisely decided to wait.” And then she added almost under her breath but loud enough for Joann to hear, “Just because some people have a lot of money doesn’t mean they can run the church.” Betty gathered her papers and left Joann standing there with her mouth open.

That night Joann tossed and turned. She kept thinking about Betty’s harsh comment. She and her husband had always tried to give to the church in response to God’s love for them. The ladies had tabled the issue mostly because of a lack of funds. Why couldn’t she and her husband be like Mrs. Johnson and donate the par aments? Did Betty’s comment mean that she thought they were making their contributions just so they could run the church? Was she telling other people that?

The next Sunday after church, Joann and Betty avoided one another during the coffee hour. They bumped into one another by coincidence in the cloak room, but they both put on their coats in silence. The next few Sundays were tough on Joann. She couldn’t concentrate during the service. She kept wondering about what other people might be thinking about her and her husband especially when they put their envelope in the offering plate.

One day Joann finally called Betty. “Can I come over. We need to talk.” Joann sat in Betty’s living room. She said as kindly as she could, “Betty, after that last Ladies Aid meeting you made a comment that really offended me, and I think it’s hurt our relationship.” Joann explained her and her husband’s motivation for giving. Betty said, “I’m glad you came over. That was a very rude comment I made. Somehow it just came out. I guess I’ve been envious. I know I should have apologized long ago. It *has* hurt our relationship. I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?” Joann said, “Yes, of course. I forgive you.” Both of the ladies felt much better. Neither of them held a grudge. *Their* relationship wounded by sin was healed. But in Joann’s words of forgiveness, something more than that, even better than that had happened. That forgiveness Joann pronounced to Betty also healed her relationship with God. And here’s how.

Three men each hung on a cross. Jesus was in the middle with a man on his left and a man on his right. The soldiers and rulers and people who passed by looked up at Jesus in unbelief and mocked him saying, “If you are the Christ, if you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Even one of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” And then he turned to Jesus and said, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Now this man, this criminal, who had done something so heinous as to be crucified, is the perfect model of repentance. He confesses his sin. “We are punished justly. We are getting what our deeds deserve. I have committed crimes and deserve condemnation.” He even rebukes unbelief. But he does more than confess his sin. He turns to Jesus for forgiveness. “Jesus remember me. Remember me in my pitiful state when you’re ruling the kingdom of heaven.” At this last hour, his only hope is Jesus. He believes. This is true repentance. He confesses his sin and turns in faith to Jesus for forgiveness. He turns from sin and turns to Jesus.

Now I’m not sure what specific means the Holy Spirit used to work this repentance in this man. Had he heard of Jesus from others? Had he heard Jesus preach the Law and Gospel himself? Had he been in the crowd at

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the Mount or listened to Jesus at the Temple? Had he heard Jesus forgive the soldiers who crucified him. Or maybe it was that the full, literal Gospel hung right beside him. He turned and saw Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh, who had done nothing wrong, suffering and dying upon the cross for the sins of the world. He turned and saw Jesus giving his very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, for the forgiveness of his sins. Whether it was heard or whether it was seen, I do know that the Holy Spirit worked this faith through the means of the Gospel.

But what would have happened if Jesus had said, “No. You’re still unrepentant. You’re not really sorry. You don’t truly believe. No forgiveness for you.” His sins would have remained bound. He’d be barred from heaven. Or what if Jesus had said nothing in reply. The man would never have known if his sins were forgiven or not. He’d have died in despair without hope. But Jesus does the most important thing in confession and absolution. He absolves him. He said, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Now Jesus doesn’t directly say, “Your sins are forgiven.” Nor does he launch into a long theological dissertation about what forgiveness of sins means. It’s a little hard to speak when you’ve been beaten raw, lost half your blood, and are gasping for every breath. But Jesus in those brief words pronounces to him what the forgiveness of his sins *does*. It opens paradise for him. It opens heaven for him. “Today you will be with me in paradise.” This man’s sins were forgiven because Jesus died for him, and Jesus forgave him. The prophet Isaiah says, **“He was pierced for our transgressions . . . and by his wounds we are healed.”** By his wounds, Jesus healed him. And we don’t doubt for a moment that this man’s sins were forgiven and that he is in heaven today because Jesus said so.

But what about us? We repent of our sin. We confess our sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. But when we turn, we don’t see Jesus. He doesn’t walk this earth the way he did before he ascended. We don’t hear his own voice saying, “Your sins are forgiven. You will be with me in paradise.” He seems to be out of earshot in heaven. Did he say yes, no, or nothing at all. Are our sins forgiven or not? How do we know? We know our sins are forgiven because even though we don’t hear his voice, Jesus still says so.

How? Because Jesus has given us a wonderful gift. It’s called the Office of the Keys. In Matthew 18, Jesus said, **“Whatever sins you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever sins you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”** Jesus is still speaking forgiveness, but he’s speaking through means. He speaks through the means of his church to whom he’s given these keys to lock heaven for impenitent sinners but to unlock heaven for repentant sinners.

Jesus has given these keys to his church. Now understand that the church calls pastors to administer these keys publicly and on behalf of the congregation. We don’t draw straws before the service to see who will be pronouncing absolution today or for that matter who will be baptizing during the service or consecrating the bread and wine. We don’t have a weekly sign-up sheet to man the confessional and hear and absolve the confidential sins of individuals in the congregation. We don’t run around freely absolving sins we know nothing about, sins that may have already been bound because of impenitence. We call pastors to administer these keys. They stand in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ and speak his words of forgiveness. And this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord said it himself.

But if your brother sins against *you*, you don’t run to the pastor or bring it up at the next voters meeting. You go and show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you and repents of his sin, you forgive him. You have won your brother. This is the goal of Matthew 18. Matthew 18 isn’t intended to be just a procedure for getting rid of sinful people. Matthew 18 is a procedure for bringing sinful people to repentance that their sins may be forgiven. And if it never makes it up to the elders or pastor or church meeting level, so much the better.

Now understand this. When you forgive the sins of your brother, or vice versa, not only is the relationship healed between you and your brother, but also with God. When a Christian pronounces his forgiveness to his brother, he’s also pronouncing God’s forgiveness to him. You loose his sin and open heaven for him. You don’t have to say, “Well now we need to go to the pastor to make it official.” No, his sin is forgiven before God because Jesus died for him and through the voice of a Christian brother or sister, Jesus says so.

This is the wonderful gift God has given us in the Office of the Keys. This is the healing power of confession and absolution. By his wounds and words of forgiveness, Jesus heals our wounded relationships. He heals our relationships with one another, but most importantly he heals our relationship with God. Amen.

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