

Sermon Easter 2 2019

April 28, 2019

John 20:19-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read, especially the words, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld”**

This passage is one of those that I always think of when I think of things that I finally understood only after I really grasped Lutheranism. What do I mean? Well, for example, I remember I had become Lutheran during my senior year of college and that following summer some friends of mine from Navigators got married. At the reception I ended up talking to another friend of mine about this passage. He was Evangelical and asked me about this verse because he acknowledged he didn't know how to handle it. Why is this verse hard to handle for an evangelical? Well primarily because they hear the Pharisees saying that only God has the authority to forgive sins when Jesus heals the paralytic. Of course, that's the point of why Jesus says what He says. He tells the paralytic to get up and walk because his sins are forgiven, and He says it that the people there would know that “the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins.” So everyone rightly draws from this that Jesus is God in the flesh and therefore is authorized to forgive. But what to do with this verse in view that? How does only God have authority to forgive and Jesus says, **“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them?”**

Well, as I said I didn't get it till I really became Lutheran, so I answered something to the effect that this was an indication of the reality of what was happening in heaven by virtue of what Christ had won on the cross—which is a Calvinist answer. If you're familiar with John Calvin, the theologian that sort of sits at the foundation for the Reformed, the Presbyterians, and a lot of other Protestant Churches, that's sort of what he says about the Lord's Supper. He says in the Supper you get this bread and that points you to what's really happening in heaven where your soul ascends and feeds on the body of Jesus spiritually.

But Christians, Lutherans!, this isn't what these words say. They don't say that this points us to something in heaven. They say, if these men forgive sins, those sins are forgiven! But we balk at this, don't we? Why? Why do we have trouble with it? Why when I tell you to come for private confession—which is a very Lutheran thing, Luther encouraged it—why don't you want to come?!

On the one hand it's partially because you don't want me to know your sin, isn't it? It's partially because you're afraid that I'll think less of you, that then I'll know just what

a sinner you are, right? Oh don't worry, I already know. Why do you think I'm here? I'm here because you're sinners. When you confess your sins to me in confession, I'm not learning anything about you I didn't already know. I already knew you were a sinner. In fact, that's the easy part, hearing confession and absolving. I get to apply the Gospel to that sin. I remember in seminary the professors telling us we'd bear the weight of our congregation's sin, and thinking that this meant that I would bear the weight of what I heard in confession. That was so wrong. The sins I hear confessed privately are easy. They're left in Christ's tomb! Over, dealt with, addressed with Christ's word from the cross: tetelestai! It has been and is done! Period.

So why don't people come to confess? Because of that fear. Why else? Because there's a catch with hearing this word from a man, isn't there? What's the catch? That man can't see your heart. Isn't that the issue, or an issue? We worry about this whole thing because a man cannot view into the heart of another man. Only God can address the heart of man. Only God can see it.

In fact, the issue is all the more difficult when it comes to the other portion, isn't it? **"If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."** This is hard, isn't it? We are so lambasted with the right idea that God is the only One who can see the heart, that we should not judge that when we hear of a man withholding forgiveness, we automatically assume it's an overstepping of bounds and that it's unloving. When we hear of a congregation excommunicating someone, we assume that this isn't right, that it's judgmental, that it's unloving. Just to address that quickly, what is the point of withholding forgiveness? If I would ever have to tell you that you cannot hear that absolution at the beginning of the service as applying to you—God forbid it---but if I would have to do that, what's the point? Is it to lord myself over you? Is it to rub your nose in your sin and tell you that you are the human equivalent to a bad dog? No, it's that you would acknowledge its sinfulness and receive the mercy of Christ's blood applied to it. It's that you would repent of it and trust in Jesus. And as I say that, we do also have to acknowledge that since man can't see in to man's heart, sometimes this comes out wrong. And what do we deal with then? The clear word of God. Satan, of course, loves to divide in those instances, but we stand on God's commands and not on what men have said, as certainly men have erred in such things. Just look at how Luther was mistreated. In that case we certainly hold the Word over man. But that's an issue.

Of course, there's another reason people don't come, and what's that? Just like the understanding that God is the only one that can see man's heart is right, there is a right understanding that also tells you that no man mediates between God and you. **"There is one mediator between God and man, the man, Jesus Christ."** Why would you

seek to tell a sinful man something then have that sinful man tell you that you are forgiven? In other words, I keep saying I didn't get this till I really got Lutheranism, how do we get this?

Well, we take those words to mean just that. We take those words and hear the absolution, as Luther said in the Catechism, *"from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven."* In other words, just as I talked about God using created things to accomplish His goals, we trust that He is working through this jar of clay standing before you and telling you that yes you really are forgiven. Or as the Catechism also says, we trust that this is *"just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."*

You see, rather than thinking this is some sign of some reality in heaven that we look at, instead what we see is this is that reality of heaven coming to you. This is that blood of Christ being applied to you. This is the forgiveness won on the cross delivered to you, God forgiving you now through it.

And as I say that, we often don't think in those terms, right? So what's the point? Why do I need this? Why do I need this jar of clay to tell me what I already know? Why do I need someone just as sinful as me to tell me what God has done? Why would that mean anything? First of all it means something because Jesus puts His Word of promise with it. And look at how He does this with those disciples: **"He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"** Do you hear it? This isn't just man working, this is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that is always with the Word, the breath of Jesus. So that's why it means something: Jesus promises it and gives His Spirit with it.

But why? Why does God do this? That you would believe. You see as we look at the doubt of Thomas today, as we look at why John says He wrote this Gospel, all of this is toward the end of faith. And what destroys faith? An unclean conscience.

Think about it. What caused Adam and Eve to run from God, to hide from Him? They knew their sin. What causes you to not care to be in Church? The tainting of your conscience. Now I'm not talking about if you miss this week because you're sick, or that week because of some other thing, but to miss regularly. And lest you think I'm wrong, understand that a conscience can be tainted in two ways: it can be tainted in thinking it's not unclean when it is; and it can be tainted when it is painfully aware of its uncleanness.

Remember what I said last week, the world, the created and fallen world around us affects us spiritually, and when we don't see it that can be a tainting of the conscience. Then we need to hear the Law of God, that it would act like a mirror. We

need to look into that mirror and see all of the blots and blemishes. Right? Because often we're like a drunk guy at the bar: we think we look much more stellar than we do. But we don't see how the hurt others cause us, how that taints us. We don't see how the anger we unleash at others, how that taints us. We don't see how the toil wears us down and seeks to draw us into despair. All of this needs cleansing.

Or then, in weakness the devil draws us into great sin, and we fall. Then we feel so tainted we can't pray, or come to hear the word. We are tainted there. All of it. And as such a precious gift, Jesus tells us that when we hear absolution, we can know we are clean! Christians, you can hear this and know this is for you. You are clean. That Christ whose death we observed last Friday, that was for you. That resurrection that we celebrated last Sunday, that was your resurrection. In fact, you were baptized into that death and raised in the resurrection to new life. This is you.

As I say that Jesus actually works through that word to bring the cross to you, to return you to that fresh cleanness of your baptism. It's actually happening, here, now. Jesus to you. That's how we understand it as Lutherans.

And with that in mind, I'd like to close with two thoughts. First, for those of you in our Wednesday class on Hebrews we'll be talking about chapter 2:3 this week which says with a stern warning, "**how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?**" That's a stern warning because we can become so comfortable with the idea that we are forgiven, we forget just how great that salvation is. Don't forget. Enjoy it, appreciate it, cling to it with every last ounce of life. And come and receive the fruit of it as Jesus serves you with it week in and week out.

Second, as you think about this passage, think about it like a Lutheran. Seek confession, more properly I should say, seek absolution. Seek it privately from me as your pastor. Seek it because this is such a precious gift. Luther says that God is so abundantly gracious in His gifts that He would give them in manifold ways, in baptism, in the Holy Supper, in the Gospel, the absolution, and the consolation and conversation of Christians. Don't neglect any of those. Seek them all. Seek them and know that in them Jesus is working to give you what He won, to bring the fruit of His work 2000 years ago in Jerusalem to you here and now. Seek then even that from this lowly jar of clay before you. God promises to work here and He is the God who does not lie. Amen.