

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth; for His word is truth. Amen

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity (2022)

Take Heart Your Sins are Forgiven

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“And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”” (Matthew 9:2–6, ESV)

What a wonderful topic the Gospel Reading brings to our ears and hearts today: Forgiveness! It is such a wonderful topic because there is not one among us today who doesn't need forgiveness. Who among us doesn't relish forgiveness, and who doesn't give thanks to God for the forgiveness won for us by His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. However, the Gospel also shows us those who do not understand that today, God's forgiveness comes to His people through His chosen means: the Word of the Gospel and His blessed Sacraments.

In the Gospel, we see God's primary means of grace, His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Christ began His ministry at the River Jordan with His Baptism. There God the Father anointed His Son with the Holy Spirit and declared that this Jesus was His *“beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* (Matthew 3:17, ESV) From that moment until His death upon the Altar of the Cross, our Lord went throughout Judea preaching, healing, and forgiving sins. His life was the living Gospel as He went forth, healing the sick, teaching salvation through faith in Him, and forgiving sins. Furthermore, as He went forth, He built His Church through His ministry of forgiveness. Furthermore, during His ministry He also gave the Church the ability to continue His forgiveness after His ascension into heaven. Christ gave the Church His sacramental gifts of: Baptism, Holy Communion, and Absolution.

Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus said to him, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* (John 3:3, ESV) As we know, our Lord's words confused Nicodemus so he asked, how can a man be born again? *“Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* (John 3:5–6, ESV) To be born again is to be Baptized. Through this blessed sacrament God provides His children several blessings, including the forgiveness of sins. St. Peter affirms this in his sermon on Pentecost when he responds to the voices of those who having been convicted of their sin of killing the Messiah. Remorseful of their complicity in killing the Messiah, they ask, *“Brothers, what shall we do?”* And Peter said to them, *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”*” (Acts 2:37–39, ESV) In baptism, for the sake of His Son's holy and precious death, God's forgiveness is poured out upon all, who are baptized in His holy and Triune name firmly believing that what they receive is God's forgiveness and His adoption of them as His blessed children.

On the night He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus gave the Church the meal of forgiveness as He instituted His holy Supper. Sitting in the upper room at supper with His apostles, our Lord turned to them, ***“Took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:26–28, ESV)***

Then on the night of His resurrection our Lord Jesus appeared to ten of His apostles and said to them, ***“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:23, ESV)*** Thereby establishing for the Church, the Office of the Keys, the authority to forgive or retain sins. This office is now fulfilled through the Sacrament of Absolution. That is, after the pastor has heard your confession, in the stead and by the authority of Christ, He announces God’s forgiveness to you of your sins.

Three Means: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution, each a visible manifestation of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through which God makes Himself known to you, first as your Creator, both in your physical birth and again in your rebirth as a child of His, second, He makes Himself known to you as your Redeemer, saving you from your sin with His bloody sacrifice on the Altar of the Cross, and third, as your Sanctifier, making you holy as God the Holy Spirit gives you the gift of faith and conforms your will to His. All of these are God’s gifts through which He pours out His grace upon you through the Gospel and His Gospel Means of Grace.

This is the primary message of the Gospel Reading for today. But sadly, we also see those who deny Christ’s forgiveness, saying, ***“This man is blaspheming.” (Matthew 9:3, ESV)*** and St. Luke tells us they said, ***“Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21, ESV)*** These were the Pharisee’s, the legalists, who held fast to the Law for salvation. But we know that the life, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ did away with the Law, the OT legal requirements for salvation, replacing it with the grace and mercy of God proclaimed through the Gospel.

But sadly today there are so many who want to cling to the understanding of the Pharisee’s, ***“Who can forgive sins but God alone?”*** Therefore, they deny the forgiveness of sins through the Means of Grace, exchanging them for their self-perceived righteousness. They turn the Gospel of Baptism into Law, insisting that baptism is nothing more than their first act of obedience or an outcome of their free will. Thus, their work! They refuse the forgiveness offered in Holy Communion, insisting it is nothing more than a symbol of faith in which they are remembering the Lord. And like the Pharisee’s they shout, ***“who can forgive sin except God!”*** The self-centered cannot help but deny God’s grace through these means because they cannot understand how forgiveness happens in these blessed Sacraments.

Sadly, I recently read about a pastor who had assumed a vacancy in a Lutheran congregation in Minnesota. The church was a small mission church, and the vacancy pastor was concerned about doing everything he could to help the church grow. Therefore, he didn’t want to do anything that might offend a member or the sensibilities of those who might be first time visitors, seeking a new church home.

Officiating his first Divine Service in this little church, he led the congregation in confession, and according to the rubrics of the Divine Service, he spoke these familiar words of absolution:

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 your sins in the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Immediately after having spoken those words, an entire family stood up and walked out of the church. When the service was over, the vacancy pastor went to one of the elders and asked him what happened? “Oh,” he said, “They don’t believe you can do that.” “Do what?” the pastor asked. “They don’t think you can forgive them their sins.” Puzzled, the pastor asked the elder, “What did they do when your previous pastor absolved the congregation?” “He never did,” replied the elder.

Not wanting to offend people again by proclaiming the true word of Scripture that a mere man can forgive their sins, he removed absolution from the service. Fearful of offending someone with the truth of God’s Word, this pastor capitulated to the prevailing opinion throughout American Protestantism that a man cannot forgive sins committed against God. That he cannot stand in Christ’s place as His ambassador and proclaim Christ’s forgiveness upon them. American Protestantism finds absolution from the pastor offensive, and they simply refuse to believe that a pastor’s forgiveness is God’s forgiveness. The best he can do is to tell people that God forgives them.

This is a tragedy, for the authority of Jesus to forgive sins here on earth is a treasure, a treasure He has entrusted to His Church, to be poured out upon His people through the Means of Grace. It is a priceless treasure, a treasure worth defending. Shame on that Lutheran pastor who would deprive his congregation of absolution to avoid offending those who won’t believe. He forgot; unbelief will not undo God’s faithfulness. Scripture is clear, God claims the authority to forgive sinners their sins through the words spoken by men.

Those scribes, or Bible scholars, who judged Jesus as a blasphemer for claiming the power to forgive sins would not have dreamed of denying God the power to forgive sins. These scribes were bible-believing, church-going men. They believed in the forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, they also believed that all sin is sin committed against God and only God has the authority to forgive. They believed only God in heaven can forgive sins.

The scribes were correct, only God in heaven can forgive sins. But think about it, how good, does forgiveness do us if it is relegated to heaven? We live here, on the earth. This is where we sin and are sinned against. Here is where we suffer the effects of sin. If forgiveness is in heaven and not here on earth, then somehow, we sinners on earth, who need forgiveness, must create a way to get to heaven so we can receive the forgiveness we need. But look at the irony, we are trying to create an avenue to get to the place where our sins keep us from being. God is holy, He cannot abide sin. So even if it were possible, how could we appear in heaven in our sinful condition? We can’t. Therefore, we’re stuck here on earth.

Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins on earth. By healing the man who was paralyzed, He showed His power to forgive sin. We’re like the paralytic in today’s Gospel Reading, paralyzed by our corrupted flesh, unable to go where we would like, our bodies, our minds, and our souls do not work the way they were created to work. Sin has paralyzed us. Healing and forgiveness are two attributes of Jesus. Therefore, as the Gospel shows, He forgave the man his sins and He healed him of his paralysis.

The paralytic couldn’t walk to Jesus, but his friends knew where Jesus could be found, and they took him there. This is evangelism 101. This is fulfilling the second greatest Commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself. It also reminds us of the Great Commission of the Church, to, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of***

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20, ESV) Go to people who do not know Jesus, taking Jesus with you, introducing them to Jesus that they may be healed by Him both in body and spirit.

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins and He gave this authority to His Church, the authority to forgive sins. Nowhere else is this authority to be found. The governments of this world do not have this authority. Governments can punish or commute prison sentences, they can pardon, and they can set prisoners free. But no government has the authority to remove sin from a person’s soul. No government can free a sinner before God. Only our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can do this, and He does it through His Church. This is why the Church is called the ark of salvation, for outside of it no one can be saved. Yet everyone needs the forgiveness that Christ alone can give.

Faced with this dilemma, men today who call themselves Christians simply deny their sin. Abortion, fornication, sodomy, gluttony, drunkenness, fits of rage, selfish ambition, and all other sins emanating from the deceitful lusts of our fallen and corrupted nature are defended, excused, defined away, or considered human rights that cannot be denied. Therefore, instead of repenting and confessing their sins, seeking forgiveness and the power of the Holy Spirit that comes from forgiveness, people remain trapped in their sins. This hurts them. It embitters them. It destroys them.

But such sinners need forgiveness. If they can rise and walk, or be carried by others, they need to seek forgiveness where it can be found, in the Church. They need to come before the pastor and confess their sins, then hear him say, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Those words spoken by the pastor with the full force and authority of Jesus ensure you of your forgiveness. Ensuring you that you have received this most blessed gift from God.

Hearing those words of the pastor remind you of the words spoken by Jesus to the paralytic, “*Take Heart Your Sins are Forgiven.*” You now have the blessed consolation of knowing your soul is cleansed of sin and thereby you are healed, forgiven, and renewed. Now, you may rise from your sin-stained bed and go forth proclaiming the goodness of Him who saved you and brought you out of the darkness into His marvelous light: our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

God’s Word of truth comforts and preserves you in the true faith, granting you an unbreakable lifeline as you navigate the stormy seas of life, but the greatest life preserver of all is hearing these words, “*Your sins are forgiven you,*” because those words meet your most important need, the forgiveness of your sins, salvation and holiness before God. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now may the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen