

April 19, 2020

Second Sunday of Easter
“WWJD?”

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, “Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld” (John 20:21-23). “As the Father has sent Jesus”? Is that right? We know how Jesus was sent: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). Can the same really be said of Jesus’ disciples? Do we really dare say that “God so loved the world, that He sent the Christians, Adam, Brent, and Tim, out into the world that whoever believes them and the One they represent should not perish but have eternal life”?

Yes, that is precisely what Jesus is saying. Christians are the Body of Christ, are they not? In fact, the word Christian means “little Christ.” The young adults and I have been reading through a book called *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and in the first chapter on Community, Dietrich writes that we recognize in each other “the Christ who is present in the body.”¹ We are little Christs. We bear His name. We are remade in His image. We are His representatives here on earth.

¹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1996), 29.*

But, my, what a responsibility! Some of you may recall the phrase “What Would Jesus Do?” that was popular back in the 1990s. It was meant to be a reminder to Christians to stop and consider what Jesus would do in any given situation and do that. The problem is we’re not Jesus, and what Jesus would do is not what we do. Jesus loved God the Father with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength, obeying Him even to the point of death on a cross. Our love is not quite so committed. We have mixed motives when it comes to loving God, calling upon His name in prayer and gathering to hear His holy Word. Jesus loved His neighbor as Himself. We mostly just love ourselves. We look out for number one, which is me. We despise authority, devalue human life, deny God’s design, deprive our neighbor of his belongings, defile his reputation, and devise to get what is his in a way which only appears right. What Jesus would do is not what we do.

And so, we’re in deep trouble. We deserve God’s present and eternal punishment. How can Jesus send us, His disciples, out, as the Father has sent Him? That is simply too great a responsibility for any disciple to bear.

And yet, He does not send us alone and without aid. In our Old Testament lesson today from the prophet Ezekiel, God says to the dry bones in the valley, the bones of His people, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...and you shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 37:4-6). And here, in the Upper Room on Easter Sunday, that word of God was ultimately fulfilled. The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples, whose hope in the Lord had dried up, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Who is the Holy Spirit? He is the Helper, the Comforter, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, as we see here, who, as very God of very God Himself, with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified. He is the One who makes us holy, calling us to faith by the Gospel and delivering the forgiveness of sins that Christ won for us on the cross. He is the One who makes us "little Christs," uniting us with Christ Jesus in our Baptism, sustaining us in the one true faith by the Word, and empowering us for service in Jesus' name.

And what is that service? What does He empower us to go out and do? What Jesus did. Having breathed on His disciples, Jesus said to them, "If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." And He wasn't just speaking to the Eleven. He was speaking to the whole Church, to all Christians. "For the promise [of the gift of the Holy Spirit] is for you," the apostle Peter preached on Pentecost, "and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself" (Acts 2:39). You received the Holy Spirit, just as the disciples did. You are forgiven. And so, you, too, have the power to forgive.

Now, that's a pretty controversial statement. Many object, "But only God can forgive sins!" True, but recall that God gave this gift of forgiveness to His Son Jesus. In Mark 2, Jesus says to a paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Some of the scribes who are sitting there object, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" But Jesus, in order to show them that He has authority on earth to forgive sins, says to the paralytic, "Rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And he does.

And now Jesus Himself gives that same gift to His disciples. "If you forgive the sins of any," He says, "they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." What does Jesus say to them elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke? "Whoever hears you hears Me" (Luke 10:16). So, it is not really our forgiveness we get to speak, but God's. We are instruments only. God is the musician. But we do play a part. As the Father has sent Jesus, so have we been sent to speak God's Word of both Law and Gospel, repentance and forgiveness, confession and absolution, that whoever believes us and the One we represent should not perish but have eternal life.

As a pastor, I have the great privilege and responsibility of speaking that word publicly on this congregation's behalf. I get to stand up here in front of everyone and say, "As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins" (again, not my word of forgiveness, but God's), and they are forgiven. It's not just a reminder but a reality.

Walter Koelher, in his masterful work on the subject, says, “The absolution does not simply promise forgiveness, nor does it merely speak an assurance or reassurance of God’s forgiveness. Rather, the absolution grants and bestows forgiveness. It is God’s act of forgiving now. In other words, that which is spoken becomes an actuality for the penitent.”² As Pastor Preece over at Zion Lutheran likes to say, “In the Absolution, you are absolutely forgiven!”² *Walter J. Koelher, Counseling & Confession: The Role of Confession and Absolution in Pastoral Counseling, (Concordia Seminary Press: St. Louis, 2011), 47.*

But the same is true of all Christians privately. Because it is the same divine word of forgiveness, when you also do what Jesus did, when you say to a fellow human being, or when someone says to you, “I forgive you, in the name of Jesus,” it is just as valid and certain as if a pastor said it, which is to say, it is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

It’s a wonder, then, we don’t value Absolution more. I can’t tell you how many people came to me at the beginning of all this asking, “When can we have the Lord’s Supper?” But not one came to me asking, “When can we have Absolution?” And we didn’t, not for a couple of weeks, anyway. We were trying this homechurch thing, which didn’t have an absolution, and no one seemed to mind. And I started to think about that. If, after all, we believe that Jesus has given us, His disciples, the authority on earth to forgive sins, then, as Luther says, we should be willing to run a hundred miles to receive this gift. It is “a precious treasure that Christ Himself has placed into the hands of His Christians that they should absolve one another their sins” (LC V “An Exhortation to Confession”). The spoken word of forgiveness is not any less a means of grace than Baptism or the Lord’s Supper, and it is far more accessible, especially now. So, do we really appreciate what we have, this great gift and privilege as disciples to do what Jesus did and forgive, not just as a reminder but a reality?

I hope so. Frankly, it’s a reality we need more of. We need more Absolution in our lives. Out there in the world we have deadlines to meet, demands to fulfill, ideals to reach, and expectations to live up to. And when we don’t, when we fail and fall short of those standards, what do we hear? “It’s ok.” “Try harder.” “You’ll get ‘em next time.” But that’s not absolution. That’s Law. That’s the bar staying right where it was: out of reach. There’s no comfort in that.

But there is comfort in hearing that “Your sins are forgiven.” That by grace through faith you are enough. That for Jesus’ sake you are loved, and it doesn’t matter how high the bar is, He’s cleared it for you and shares that victory with you. That’s the power of absolution. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven. If anyone forgives you your sins, they are forgiven. Because it’s God’s forgiveness. It is He who speaks to you and through you.

And just imagine what would happen if we started doing this. If, instead of giving someone advice about their problems, we gave them absolution. If, instead of telling someone to try harder next time, we told them how hard Jesus tried and succeeded for them. If, instead of dwelling on our own failure, we went to our pastor or a fellow Christian to receive the full healing effect of the Gospel one-on-one. What if we did what Jesus would do and forgave?

Then, we would have peace, and not the kind the world gives, the kind that's based on our performance, but the kind of peace which the world cannot give, the peace of Christ. We would not be so afraid, believing our worth hangs on who we are and what we've done or left undone. We would have joy, our hearts purged of evil and our eyes firmly fixed on the risen Son of God, who is our life eternally. Above all, we would be free, for that is what forgiveness is. It is God setting us free, letting go of our sin because of Jesus, giving us hope for a new day.

Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." If you believe that the forgiveness I speak is not my forgiveness but God's, let it be done for you as you believe. Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Forgive your spouse, your children, your friends. As the Father has sent Jesus, so is Jesus sending you. And He is not sending you alone.

*In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen. The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

Soli Deo gloria