

*Quasimodo Geniti*

John 20:19-31

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

“Our churches teach that private Absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing all sins is not necessary for Confession. For, according to the Psalm, it is impossible. ‘Who can discern his errors?’ (Psalm 19:12).” (AC XI)

Would our Lutheran forefathers recognize the Lutheran church today?

In some ways, yes, and in some ways, no.

They would be able to follow our Divine Service III, even if they didn't know English. They might even be able to follow some of our hymns when we sing the old Lutheran or Latin hymns. One thing would stick out like a sore thumb: corporate confession and absolution. This is not a part of the historical liturgy handed down by the church. It is an innovation borne out of two harmful influences upon the church: pietism and rationalism.

Pietism came from within the church. Piety is a good thing. Pietism is a bad thing. It emphasizes religious experience over religious formality and liturgy. It elevates emotion above doctrine. It removes the certainty of salvation from the objective means which Jesus mandated in Word and Sacrament to the personal experience and feelings in the heart of the believer. It elevated the confession part of confession and absolution over the absolution pronounced by the pastor. Since the pastor's part wasn't as important, pastors pronounced forgiveness to groups of people instead of individuals.

Rationalism came from outside the church. It rejects things that it can't figure out or use reason to have it make sense. Out of this movement came doubt about the miracles in the Bible.

Rationalism rejects the idea that a man can pronounce forgiveness of sins. You can still see this rejection in many Evangelical circles of Christianity today.

Slowly but surely, the practice of private confession and absolution died in Lutheran circles. Our beloved LCMS grew out of the garden of both pietism and rationalism. One of our founders, Loehle, fought for the practice of private confession and absolution, but, sadly, it didn't form any kind of lasting support. The corporate confession and absolution that we practice today has been the norm. And that is a shame. As our confessions clearly state, our forefathers never intended to abolish the practice of private confession and absolution.

Jesus teaches us today about the Office of the Keys: “Jesus said to them again, ‘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 any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’” (vv. 21-23)

Jesus sent the Apostles to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name. He sends pastors to proclaim the same thing. Pastors are ambassadors of Christ who proclaim His word and apply His forgiveness through the sacraments that He instituted. Pastors are stewards of the mysteries of God, as Paul puts it. (1 Corinthians 4:1)

Now certainly, any Christian, can announce the grace of God to another person. If you've ever lived in a family, you've had the opportunity to announce this forgiveness. Fathers, especially, should frequently announce the forgiveness of sins to their families.

As a side note, if someone tells you they're sorry, you shouldn't respond with, “that's okay,” or “don't worry about it.” You should pronounce forgiveness. Either, “I forgive you,” or “you're forgiven.”

When we say to God, “I’m sorry,” He doesn’t respond with “that’s okay.” He remembers the payment for sin that Jesus won on the cross and says, “I forgive you. As far as the east is from the west, so far [do I] remove [your] transgression from you.” (Psalm 103:12)

He uses pastors to announce this to you personally! The pastor doesn’t say, “I forgive you,” but “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.” He applies the Office of the Keys to you and frames it in the fact of your baptism. He announces the same thing whether its private or corporate confession and absolution.

Pastor Holm and I don’t announce this out of our own authority. We don’t have any personal authority to forgive sins. We only forgive sins from Christ’s authority. When we announce forgiveness in your midst, it is just like today’s Gospel reading: Jesus stands in your midst and says, “Peace be with you.” (vv. 19, 21) You have peace between you and God!

When people in the Scriptures come in contact with the holy, be it God Himself or His angels, their first reaction is usually fear. You know you’re a sinner. You may be able to fool others or even yourself to some extent, but when you come into physical contact with the Holy, you can’t hide. You know there is enmity between you and your Creator. But Jesus comes and says, “Peace be with you.” Jesus pays the debt you owe, and replaces it with peace!

I don’t want you to mishear me. I’m not advocating we get rid of corporate confession and absolution. The confession that we confess contains all our sins. There’s not a sin you can commit that’s not covered by the confession we confess. And the absolution that I announce in the stead and by the command of Jesus is real absolution. You have peace with God!

So why am I advocating for private confession and absolution?

Because it's personal!

Satan attacks you personally!

He uses two main tactics.

Satan's first attack is to convince you that your sin is no sin, "did God really say..." Saint John warns us: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 Jn 1:8) John says that if you say you have no sins, you're an unbeliever. This may be why so many people have abandoned the church. They don't think they're sinners. They don't think they have a problem with God. Think of how many of our kids and grandkids don't go to church. I believe they don't think they need it. They certainly don't think that they need forgiveness through an organization or a pastor. They are deceived. Jesus set up the church through His mandates of Baptism, preaching and teaching, Confession and Absolution, and the Lord's Supper so that we might receive the forgiveness of sins He so richly provides!

And we need that forgiveness again and again, don't we? Paul outlines the Christian life in Romans 7: "I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." (vv. 18-19) Paul is not talking about or to unbelievers. He is talking about himself and by extension, all of us. What is the answer to this problem? Jesus Christ! "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom 8:1) Thanks be to God, you are put into Christ through the Word and Sacraments that He instituted!

Satan's second attack is to convince you that no one is as guilty as you are! "No one would *ever* commit whatever *your* 'big' sin is." Satan tries to convince you that you're alone and that God couldn't forgive *that* horrible sin. This leads to despair. Judas, who betrayed our Lord, despaired. We have all betrayed our Lord. Our hearts are idol factories.

We invent one god, little 'g,' god, that is, after another to worship instead of the Living God. This is a betrayal just as bad as the betrayal of Judas. His despair led to a noose and eternal damnation.

Paul reminds us that “no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.” (1 Cor 10:13) This means no sin that you've done isn't common to man. You're not alone. Alcoholics Anonymous has been pretty successful, it seems to me. I believe that one of the main reasons it is so effective is because it lets you know you're not alone. Unfortunately, it does not necessarily offer the forgiveness of sins found only in Christ unless it is a Christian group. That is where true freedom lies. Paul also says that God will provide the way to escape temptation and that is forgiveness.

Do you remember the Scarlet Letter? The adulteress was branded with a big scarlett 'A' so that everyone would know she was a sinner and they shunned her. Even if we're not branded in a public manner, it still feels that way doesn't it? It feels like we're branded and everyone is disgusted with us! We may even shun ourselves.

Run to the cross. Throw your sin on Jesus! He takes it and pays the price for it. He was shunned and punished by God so that you could be forgiven and publically vindicated. Saint John says something incredible, “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 Jn 1:9)

When you're declared forgiven, you are cleansed. God remembers your sin no more. You've probably heard someone say, or even said yourself, “I can forgive, but I can't forget.” Thanks be to God, He doesn't say that or do that. He says, you are washed clean, you are righteous, that is to say, you have peace with God.

There's an interesting prison in Norway. The prisoners basically live in a town on an island. They are treated with respect and given the ability to work and be productive members of the town.

They're not treated like animals and thrown into cages. The reoffending rate of the Norwegian offenders is the lowest in Europe. I'm not saying that we can switch to this model, but it's interesting how guilty people react when they're treated with dignity like they hadn't committed whatever heinous crime got them there in the first place.

Sin removes your dignity. God restores your dignity by dying for you and paying your debt. People with dignity tend to act with dignity. Satan tries to remove that dignity any way he can. He will try to get you to ignore your sin or he'll try to get you to despair over your sin. Don't let him. Use the means God has put into place to restore your dignity.

Private confession can be scary. It's hard to speak out loud the sin that is bothering you. You may think you're the only one that has ever done that. Or you may think that speaking that sin to your pastor or another person would lower your dignity or your reputation would be ruined. Your pastor will not be surprised. Your pastor is a sinner. I know firsthand the power of sin and the greater power of forgiveness. I love to speak forgiveness. There's no greater joy for a pastor! Your pastor has also taken a vow to never reveal your sin. I can't be coerced in court to reveal any sin you confess to me. Any pastor who reveals the sin of a confessor is defrocked and for good reason. That kind of trust, though, is built over time. It doesn't happen overnight.

I understand that it takes time to re-establish the historical practice of private confession and absolution. I would like to offer the opportunity for us to establish regular times for private confession and absolution. When we come back together, I will have times during the week set aside for it.

Now I don't want us to get legalistic about it. That's so easy for us to fall into that trap. It turns pure Gospel into the terror of the Law. When confession is made mandatory, it becomes law and not gospel. When you're required to enumerate all your sin, it becomes Law and not Gospel. These are historical examples of how confession and absolution was turned into the Law.

Confession and absolution, private or public, is all about assurance of salvation. It is the sweet, sweet Gospel applied to you personally! When you hear that general absolution after we have all confessed in the Divine Service together, it is sweet. It is sweet when your pastor puts their hand on your forehead and says the same absolution to a particular sin that Satan is harassing you with.

Enjoy the opportunity to confess. Publicly as we gather each Sunday, and privately, as you have need. Either way, this is true about the Absolution: Jesus stands in your midst and says, "Peace be with you."

In Jesus' name. Amen.