

Quasimodo Geniti
John 20:19-31

In our Gospel today, we see Jesus apply Gospel to His terrified disciples. They were hiding out in an upper room with the door closed “for fear of the Jews.” If the religious leaders had crucified Jesus, what would they do to His disciples? They had heard the report from the women that Jesus was risen from the dead and didn’t believe them. Two of them had seen the empty tomb. They had deserted Jesus. Peter had denied Him three times. They were cowering in fear. How would Jesus greet them?

Can you imagine their terror and fear?

Knowing the outcome makes it harder for us to apply our imagination to this text.

You might get an inkling of it if you remember being in trouble as a kid. You did something you know was wrong. You got caught. Now you’re waiting for the reaction from your father. Will he punish you? Will he lay a heavy guilt trip on you? Is it too much to hope that he will forgive you without making you suffer well deserved punishment?

How did you feel when you were waiting for your dad to get home?

As a parent, most of you know the difficult art of raising your children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Sometimes you come down hard on your kids. Other times you lavish grace on your kids. If you only come down hard on your kids, you will ruin your kids. If you only lavish grace on your kids, you will also ruin your kids.

God, your Father in heaven, is also faced with this same difficulty. He applies Law and Gospel to you as you grow in your faith. C.F.W. Walther expressed it this way in his third treatise on Law & Gospel:

To rightly distinguish Law and Gospel is the most difficult and highest Christian art—and for theologians in particular. It is taught by the Holy Spirit in combination with experience.

Walther is talking to last-year seminarians who are getting ready to go out and be pastors. Pastors are like parents in a way as they apply law and gospel to the people that God has placed in their care. Like parents, we learn from God's Word and the Holy Spirit through experience how to apply law and gospel. Let's consider one of the most famous situations in the Old Testament.

David is the king of Israel. Instead of leading his men in battle like he's supposed to, he's lounging around his palace. From his palace he sees Bathsheba bathing and desires another man's wife. He sleeps with Bathsheba and apparently feels no remorse. She becomes pregnant and now he's got a problem. Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, is faithfully fighting for David on the front lines. David tries to make it appear like his child is actually Uriah's child. He sends for Uriah and tries to get him to sleep with his wife. Uriah again proves faithful to David. He refuses to participate in his home life while there are still battles to be fought. That may sound odd to us, but that was how it worked in David's day. David's deceptive plan didn't work and so he makes it even worse. He arranges the murder of Uriah so that Bathsheba would no longer be a married woman. After a period of mourning, David moves Bathsheba into his palace. Even after all this obvious sin, David apparently feels no remorse for that sin. God sends Nathan to deal with David.

David must be dealt with. He's God's chosen ruler of Israel. David's made a mockery of God's choice by neglecting the duties of his office, committing adultery with a faithful soldier's wife, tried to cover up his sin with treachery, and when that didn't work, murdered that soldier so he could have that faithful soldier's wife as his own. How would Nathan handle David. Would he apply Law or Gospel?

You know the story. Nathan artfully applies the Law to David. David was in denial over his sin. Living in a state of unforgiven sin is a horrible place to live. It's like living with cancer and not cutting it out or getting it treated. So, Nathan needs to convince David that he has, in fact, sinned and deserves condemnation. But David is king. How do you tell someone who has the power of life and death over you that he's a "poor, miserable sinner?"

Nathan tells David a story about a rich man and poor man. The rich man has all sorts of land and livestock. The poor man has one little ewe lamb that he loves dearly. The rich man has a traveler come and needs to provide a feast in hospitality. Hospitality was a big deal back then. Meat wasn't a staple in the diet at this time but was reserved for feasts and the like. When you had a visitor, you were expected to kill a lamb or goat and feed your guest a feast. The selfish rich man didn't want to spare a lamb from his multitude, so he took the little ewe lamb from his poor neighbor. David is naturally outraged and says, "as the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." (2 Samuel 12:5-6)

Nathan then hits David with, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7) He then describes how David's actions are just as reprehensible as the rich man and then pronounces the judgment of God against David. David repents and cries, "I have sinned against the Lord." (2 Samuel 12:13) After David recognizes his sin and repents, Nathan immediately applies God's Gospel: "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." (2 Samuel 12:13)

It would have been ludicrous for Nathan to stand in David's presence and say, "Peace be with you." David did not have peace with God. He had to hear the Law of God to know that his soul was in mortal danger. We do a great disservice to someone by telling them they're okay with God when they aren't. This is nothing new. God was mad at the prophets and priests of Jeremiah's day who say, "peace, peace, when there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6:14) He becomes angry with us when we do the same thing.

You are actually expected to live a virtuous life. And the virtuous life is one informed by the Word of God, specifically the Ten Commandments, and not informed by your own whims or desires. And when you're plagued by sin, you rush to receive absolution. Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, are described this way: "they were righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." (Luke 1:6) This doesn't mean they were sinless. This means they were counted righteous before God, strove to live as people of God as informed by God's Word, and received the medicine of forgiveness when they needed it with the means that God provided which, at that time, were the temple sacrifices. This should describe all of us who claim to be people of God. We are counted righteous, we strive to live as Christians, and we receive the forgiveness of sins with the means that God provides.

What about the disciples in today's Gospel reading? They are frozen with fear and have no clue what's going to happen to them or what they should do. They are already well aware of their sin before God. They don't need to be confronted like David was confronted by Nathan. They need the healing balm that only forgiveness and peace with God can provide. Jesus stands in the midst suddenly and the very first thing He says is "Peace be with you." (v. 19) As He's pronouncing peace in their midst, He shows them the means of that peace, His wounds. He then establishes the means by which that same peace comes to you and to me, the Office of the Keys.

Last year, I pointed out how the practice of private confession and absolution had been perverted to a corporate confession and absolution that we do today. The real impetus behind this switch was the desire to place the assurance of forgiveness of sins in the feelings in your heart instead of the pronouncement by the pastor. After all, the pronouncement seems pretty cold and unimpressive. We want to "feel" the forgiveness.

When I came into Lutheranism, the pastoral visit was a shock to me.

Outside of Lutheranism, it really depends on the size of your congregation whether you get any time with your pastor. And in the rare instances that you do see your pastor, it's more like a social visit than an encounter with God. The standard, both historical and current, Lutheran pastor's visit is much different. First, we expect to have pastoral visits. Whether it's going to the church to see your pastor or him coming to you, visits with your pastor are a regular part of Christian life. Second, they are liturgical. That seemed really odd to me at first, but I came to love it. When I visit you, you don't need to know what I think or feel, but you do need to know what God thinks and what His attitude is towards you. Nothing is better than delivering this to you than the liturgy. And since the liturgies we use are based on the Word of God, you can have confidence in them.

Jesus establishes the Office of the Keys so we can have confidence in the forgiveness of sins and know that we have peace with God. He wants your confidence placed in the hearing that peace pronounced and not in the feelings you have in your heart. It's not that we are cold automatons with no feelings but rather our confidence is in external things which, in turn, train our emotions so that they are rightly ordered in moderation.

Emotion is a powerful thing that needs to be trained. I fear modern influences are not helpful in training our emotions, at least, as long as I have been alive. Pop music, movies, and electronic screens that fill our lives do a horrible job of training our emotions. They are really great at training us to seek superficial entertainment and diversion over superficial things that should have little to no impact on our lives. They are also really great at keeping us focused on superficial things and keeping us away from serious thought and reflection. The main battle now seems not to be distinguishing from good and evil, but to have any of us care about anything worthwhile and lasting.

That's where the liturgy is a gift. Especially the historic liturgy found in Divine Service III that has been handed down to us by our forefathers and stood the test of time. It trains our emotions in a meaningful way.

It reveals to us heavenly things. It delivers God's balm of forgiveness. It delivers to us God's will for our lives which is really nothing else but service to the neighbor. It trains us in what is good, true, and beautiful. These things, like emotions, must be trained in us. And the Word of God with the Holy Spirit is the best teacher of these things.

Through the audible word of hymnody, liturgy, absolution, lectionary readings, preaching, and prayer we hear God's Law and Gospel. Through the visible Word of bread and wine, we taste and see that our God is good. Through these means God shows us His will for our lives, where we have fallen short and sinned, where forgiveness is found, and how these things form the permanence of life. We are then set loose on the world to spread that same message of fall and redemption, of sin and forgiveness, of Jesus and His work on behalf of all people. We spread it through speech and service. Our message is the same as Jesus's message to you today:

"Do not disbelieve, but believe." (v. 27)

Your confession is the same as St. Thomas' confession:

[Jesus is] My Lord and My God." (v. 28)

And Jesus calls you blessed because you believe. Blessed with forgiveness of sins. Blessed with peace with God. Blessed with eternal life. You indeed have life in His name.

Amen.