

Quasimodo Geniti
John 20:19-31

There are different types of forgiveness. Having peace with God is more than just forgiveness of sin, but forgiveness of sin must certainly happen for peace with God to happen. And there are different types of forgiveness. We'll leave out forgiveness between brothers and sisters. It's not that it isn't important to live in forgiveness with each other, but we're primarily talking about peace with God today and not peace with each other. We'll talk about that another time.

We see Jesus establishing the Office of the Keys in today's Gospel. We understand that the Office of the Keys was given to the church through the apostles. But Jesus isn't talking to the whole church here. He's talking to His apostles. Through them, the Office of the Keys is given to the whole church, but it's only to be exercised by pastors. Just like teaching, or preaching. Baptism can be done by anyone in an emergency but is, and should, normally be done by pastors.

It has nothing to do with the abilities of the pastor. We all have different abilities. There are so many men smarter and more capable than I am. You already know that women cannot be pastors. Paul instructs Timothy, and thus the church, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence." (1 Tim 2:12) Paul is specifically talking about the office of pastor in the church. Women not being pastors also has absolutely nothing to do with ability. Paul actually appeals to the order of creation. This is also why men are the head of the household. So it's not about ability between the sexes either. There are also so many women smarter and more capable than myself. It's not about ability; it's about an office. Paul likens it to stewardship (1 Corinthians 4:1) Qualified men are put into the office of pastor to preach and teach, administer Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. He's also expected to take these wonderful gifts of God to the shut-ins who cannot make it to the Divine Service. You might say that the Divine Service comes to them.

God puts men into the office of the ministry to act as stewards of God's grace. We're focusing on the Office of the Keys today which Jesus established in our Gospel reading:

[Jesus] 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. 22-23)

The Office of the Keys has two parts: forgiveness of sins and retention of sins. The forgiveness of sins is handled with confession and absolution. The retention of sins is handled with excommunication. Both have the same goal: peace with God. Let's start with the difficult one: excommunication.

Excommunication is applied to unrepentant sinners so that they face the temporal consequences of their sin. All sin has temporal consequences. If someone insists on sex outside of marriage, there will be consequences. It could mean something like a STD. Statistics show that STDs in America have reached all new highs every year from 2014 to 2019.¹ There's nothing to indicate that this won't continue. Even if we haven't participated in extramarital sex, how many of us have turned a blind eye to our children participating in extramarital sex? How many of us have even participated in the attitudes of the sexual revolution of the 1960s that condones and promotes extramarital sex? How many of us have participated in the feminist movement that promotes female equality with men by promoting sexual promiscuity and abortion. How many of us have been too shy to promote God's good order of marriage and family? How many of us have been critical of a pastor who holds a hard line on this issue and admired pastors who turn a blind eye to extramarital sex? I'm not talking about someone who has repented of such sin. We are to treat them as if it never happened. If God forgets their sin as far as the east is from the west, we certainly cannot hold that sin against them.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/2021/2019-STD-surveillance-report.html>

But excommunication is a tool for those who are defiantly unrepentant. It is meant to allow the unrepentant to face the consequences of their sin so that they repent.

The best example of this is probably the prodigal son. He gains his inheritance before his father dies. This act is so shameful that he must go live in a foreign country. He basically excommunicates himself. He wastes his inheritance in reckless living and faces the consequences of such sin. He bucks the law of God and faces the consequences of living outside of God's good order. He's brought about as low as he can be; destitute and feeding pigs to barely exist. There are always temporal consequences to defying God's law. Excommunication by the church is nothing else than publicly admitting that someone is openly and publicly defying God's law. The fact that it's practiced so little in the church should alarm all of us. Paul condemns the Corinthian church because they haven't excommunicated a guy sleeping with his step mother. The purpose isn't to shame the guy. He's already shamed himself with his act; even among the pagans. The purpose is to make him suffer the consequences of his act so that he'll repent.

The prodigal son comes to his senses and repents. And his Father welcomes him back with open arms. He is not treated as a hired hand like he wants to be but his full sonship is restored to him. That is how the church is supposed to greet those who repent. We welcome back the prodigal brother or sister with open arms and treat them as if they are fully restored because they are. They once again have peace with God. The guy in Corinth who slept with his step mother repents. But the Corinthian church doesn't welcome him back with open arms. Paul has to admonish the Corinthians that this guy is restored to full sonship and should be treated as such! Often, we are too much like the older brother of the prodigal son or the Corinthian Christians than we like to admit.

If you are holding someone's sins against them, you are acting like Satan. One of Satan's nicknames is 'the accuser of the brethren.'

God forbid any of us act in such a way. But Satan is relentless. He will bring up old sin and current sin. He will entice you to sin even more. This is where the beauty of confession and absolution comes in.

We will continue to struggle with sin until we die. It's true that the Holy Spirit works new movements in us so that we love God's Law and desire to do His will. It is also true that we are plagued by the old man in us to defy God's Law and to desire to do the will of our old sinful hearts. When we fall into sin, we have the amazing gift of confession and absolution. The absolution is nothing other than Christ standing in our midst saying the same words He said to the cowering disciples: "Peace be with you." (vv. 19, 21) This happens in several ways.

First is the Lord's Prayer. When you pray the fifth petition, you are asking God to forgive your sins. "Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Mt 7:9-11) When you ask for forgiveness, your Father in heaven gives you peace through the forgiveness of your sin. The fifth petition is not conditional. Thanks be to God, He doesn't forgive us based on how well we forgive others. But if we have received such a good gift as peace with God, how can we not extend that to those around us?

Second is confession and absolution with a trusted brother or sister in Christ. This is one of the aspects of the mutual consolation of the brotherhood. We share our burdens with our trusted brother or sister in Christ and they share with us the wonderful news of the grace of God; based not on our merits but on Christ's merits! As a Christian, you have the authority to proclaim the grace of God to anyone who needs it. In light of this, there's a couple of phrases I want you to strike from your vocabulary. When someone confesses a wrong, don't say "that's okay" or "don't worry about it" or "no big deal" or anything like that. Sin is not okay or nothing to worry about or no big deal. But it is forgiven. Announce God's grace.

Something like “you’re forgiven for the sake of Christ.” The only solution to sin is forgiveness. Don’t be afraid to call it such and pronounce it forgiven. You might even recommend they come and see their pastor!

Third is the corporate confession and absolution we practice at the beginning of the Divine Service. This practice was started in the church in the ninth century and briefly discontinued by the Lutheran reformers. It came back into our Divine Service in the latter part of the 17th century thanks to the pietists. At least one good thing came out of pietism. The corporate confession and absolution highlights the Biblical understanding that there is no penance after forgiveness. Once you are declared forgiven, you are actually forgiven. The pastor stands “in the stead and by the command of Christ” and pronounces forgiveness. The pastor stands in for Christ and says, “Peace be with you.” This is a beautiful part of the service but, unfortunately, it seems to have degraded the practice of private confession and absolution, which is the fourth way to receive forgiveness.

Of course, that’s not the only thing that’s degraded the practice of private confession and absolution. Pietism in general degraded private confession and absolution by placing the emphasis of confession and absolution on the confession part and not the absolution part. The pietist places the emphasis of God’s work to the subjective internal realm instead of the objective external realm. So, in confession and absolution, the important part isn’t the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins, but how heart-felt your forgiveness was. The comfort moves from the external Word of God to the internal feelings about that Word of God. And feelings are not trustworthy. Additionally, the Rationalism movement of the 18th century introduced doubt that a pastor’s pronouncement of absolution actually did anything. To the rationalist, it makes no sense that a pastor can stand in the stead of the Lord Jesus Christ. Even though that’s what today’s Gospel clearly teaches. Since we all grew up in the wake of rationalism, we are all tempted to doubt the Holy Absolution. Jesus’ words to Thomas are applicable to us as well: “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” (v. 27)

Private confession and absolution is especially helpful when we are troubled by particular sins that we've done. Satan, the world, and even our flesh are good at reminding us of our sins. When you're forgiven by God, you are completely forgiven. God no longer counts that sin against you. You have peace with God. Satan, the world, and your old flesh despise that you have peace with God. They will bring up your sin to try and demolish you. This happened to me constantly at seminary, which I had heard happens. You're such a wicked person, and you want to be a pastor! Look at all the horrible things you've done in your life. I had many sleepless nights at seminary. You may experience the same thing. Look at all the wicked things you've done, and you call yourself a Christian! This is where private confession and absolution is such a gift. You feel the pastor put his hand on your head and hear God's word of forgiveness for that particular sin. Comfort and joy result from you knowing that your sin is forgiven. Comfort and joy result from knowing that you have peace with God.

God wants you to live free in that comfort and joy and so He provides many avenues for you to receive forgiveness. The Lord's prayer, confession and absolution with a dear friend in Christ, corporate confession and absolution, and private confession and absolution are gifts from God to give to you the assurance that you have peace with God. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is proof that your sin is paid for in full. "Do not disbelieve, but believe... Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have believed." (v. 27, 29)