

Lenten Midweek
The Death of Christ and Absolution
1 John 1:5-10
Luke 23:32-43

He could have said anything. His life was coming to an end. A twisted drama was being realized by twisted men. The Lord Christ could have said anything. What inner thoughts, what lament or words of exasperation come out of your mouth when you are in distress? He wasn't surprised by what was being perpetrated against Him, but not being surprised and not being overwhelmed by the situation are two different things. This was overwhelming. He knew who He was. He knew that He was good, perfectly innocent. He knew the eternal love that resided in His being – heart and soul. This violence that He suffered, He knew its origin, its character, its ugly essence. He decimated Sodom and Gomorrah with sulfur and fire. He flooded the earth because every inclination of man's heart was only evil all the time. He could have summoned twelve legions of angels to bring swift and complete justice to those who pierced Him, those who mocked Him, those who cursed and blasphemed Him. He could have said anything.

It is no accident. What He chose to say at that moment, the moment that spikes are driven through His hands and feet, the moment that the cross is lifting into a vertical position, the moment that the weight of His body pulls against the metal that pierced His flesh – what He chose to say as He is exposed as an object of derision for His tormentors, it is no accident. His whole life has been lived as an enactment of these words: "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). An absolution; that is what He spoke. How often have you needed an absolution? Who do you want to receive it from? We ought to be good at apologizing. When I was a youngster in organized sports, every coach had the same dictum: practice makes perfect. We ought to be good at apologizing. Each of us messes up with some regularity and the occasion to apologize is always close at hand. What about forgiving someone? How good are you at that?

After you apologize to someone, what is the response you typically hear? "Oh, don't worry about it." "Hey, no problem." "Let it go." "It's all good." "No worries, man, let's just move on." It isn't that folks don't appreciate hearing a full-throated apology, it's more likely that they want to be informal, they want to avoid sounding condescending. But how do you feel afterwards, how do you feel after hearing that kind of response to your apology? What about if I decided to change the absolution in the Divine Service to something more informal? "Hey, uh, those sins you just confessed – that's just water under the bridge; go out and be the best you that you can be. We're good here. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Look at the cross. Does the church have reason to be confident about forgiveness? Is there any hesitancy in the voice of the King on the tree? Does He utter milquetoast platitudes as He suffers for the sins of humanity. Father, forgive them!

How does it feel to hear the absolution? Do you know the value of those words, spoken by an ordinary man, but a pastor who has been commanded to speak that forgiveness? Do you see the scarlet tether between the act of Christ giving up His life on the cross and the bloody words of absolution that cascade into your ears? He wants you to hear an absolution as direct and forceful as His urgent plea to His Father. Forgive them! He dies for you to hear those words. He dies to pull you out of the gutter of your guilt, out of the horrible haze of not knowing whether or not

God could love a sinner like you. Freedom comes in forgiveness. Freedom comes with an absolution. Freedom from all the dark slings and sharp arrows that your conscience hurls at you. “The words which absolution give are His who died that we might live; the minister whom Christ has sent is but His humble instrument” (Nicolaus Herman – “As Surely as I Live,” God Said).

It is a remarkable thing. The faith that I see, standing in the chancel, it is remarkable. To see the body of Christ with an expectant, hopeful, attentive gaze, totally transfixed on the words of absolution, knowing that those words give exactly what they say, knowing that those words are animated with grace and love and sacrifice and resurrection – all for us – seeing that in you is a remarkable thing. No sunset is so beautiful; no waterfall and green meadow or snow-capped mountain is so beautiful as seeing the body of Christ eager for His Word of forgiveness. When the absolution is pronounced in the Divine Service it is as though there is a room full of paralytics who have been carried to the Lord’s feet and He looks at each of us and says: “Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2). They are not theoretical sins that are absolved. None of you commits generic or abstract sin – they are real. Through your mouth, by way of your hands, in your thoughts – sins of commission and sins of omission – there are those you have hurt and those you have failed to help. You fill yourself with the world’s profane approach to life and then you wonder why your prayers falter, why you don’t sing a hymn with joy, why there is no love in your heart for your neighbor.

Why do we need an absolution? Because we live as if God did not matter and as if we mattered most. Why do we need an absolution? Because Our Lord’s Name we have not honored as we should, we have united what is holy – our very selves – with what is unholy – the trash that Satan litters our culture with. I get it; we live in this world and that is not going to change. But here’s a lie we have adopted. We have pejoratives for people who are too Christian, too uptight about right and wrong. We call people strait-laced or square or goody-two-shoes and we certainly don’t want those pejoratives ascribed to us. This line from Billy Joel is percolating around in your head somewhere: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints, the sinners are much more fun. The stained-glass curtain you’re hiding behind never lets in the sun.” So, we play footsie with the world in order to keep our street cred for being real. What a deception! Why, after receiving an absolution, would we go back to wallowing in the world’s muck?

There was one who died with Christ. He prayed, He begged to be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom. The goal, the end, the consummation of absolution is what the penitent thief heard: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). To be united with Christ in a death like His, this broken man is promised to be united with Christ in a resurrection like His. The inheritance of heaven comes through the crucified flesh of Jesus. Your personal inheritance is reaffirmed every time you hear the word of absolution. The future reality of you joining Christ in His eternal kingdom is hidden within those words: I forgive you all your sins. He could have said anything but that absolution has animated the hearts and minds of sinners for two-thousand years. Today... with Me... in Paradise. That reality is not so far off.

The light of that day is the light in which we walk now. Jesus is the light of the world. He who follows Him does not walk in darkness but has the light of life. In the light of this faith, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin. We confess our

sins and God is faithful and just, forgiving our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness. He could say anything to you. What does He say? Your sins are forgiven. Depart in peace. “All praise to You, O Christ, shall be for absolution full and free, in which You show Your richest grace; from false indulgence guard our race” (“As Surely as I Live,” God Said – LSB #614).