

On the First Sunday after Easter, or Quasimodogeniti

By

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[Translated by Jason Oakland and Wade Johnston]

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and in love be with you all. Amen.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus!

That the Christian Church and therefore also the called servants of the same have the power to forgive sins on earth, this is one those teachings by which our Evangelical Lutheran Church is markedly distinguished from all other so-called churches. At all times, namely our church has confessed this teaching surely not timidly or shamefacedly, but with great earnest and with most joyful determination before the entire world. So it says under the second point in the very old Small Catechism of Luther, the chief book of our church in the school and in the home: “Confession has two parts. The one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution of forgiveness from the pastor as from God himself, not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven.” And in the same little book, it is commanded to the servant of the church to direct this question to everyone seeking confession, “Do you believe also that my forgiveness is the forgiveness of God?” to which they should answer a confident, “Yes.” But so the youth alone in our church should surely not be taught secretly. No, when Lutherans consisting of princes, lawyers, and theologians were once required to make their confession in Augsburg in 1530, that is, a confession of faith before king and country in the name of our church, there also they in no way denied the teaching of the Church’s to forgive sins on earth but confessed the same rather quite frankly as a dear treasure of the right, true, evangelical teaching before the world. Therefore it says namely under *Article XXV.2 of the Augsburg Confession*: “The people are diligently instructed how comforting the work of absolution is and how highly and dearly absolution is to be esteemed. For it is not the voice or word of the person speaking it, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sins. For it is spoken in God’s stead and by God’s command. Great diligence is used to teach about this command and power of the keys, and how comforting and necessary it is for terrified consciences. It is also taught how God requires us to believe this absolution as much as if it were God’s voice resounding from heaven and that we should joyfully find comfort in the absolution, knowing that through such faith we obtain forgiveness of sin” (KW).

You see from this, my hearers, that our church in its excellent fundamental confession places such a great weight on the teaching of absolution, that it is impossible him who renounces this teaching to be inspired by the same Spirit as our fathers and to lay claim to the name of “Lutheran” but rather he must stand on a completely different foundation of faith.

But as everyone knows, this teaching belongs to those, who will renounce, reject, portray as false and dangerous, and fight against in all ways possible the teachings of almost all of today’s denominations and especially the Methodist church. One declares this teaching as a remnant of the papacy, as an invention of tyrannical priests and as a resting pillow for carnal,

secure men who do not want to be converted. Perhaps many a weak person has been doubtful and in error already through this slanderous speech against this holy institution of God! What should we do now? Should we perhaps recognize that our church has been incorrect on this point from time immemorial? Should we therefore renounce it and seek to direct a new Reformation of the 19th Century in this undertaking? Far be it! Let us go into the Word of God then we will find that our church in this teaching as well stands on the unshakeable foundation of the divine Word, and that all those, who strive against this teaching, strive against Christ, His Word, His merits, and His true Church.

This then allows us on occasion of our Sunday Gospel lesson today to examine it more closely.

Text: Joh. 20, 19-31

[New International Version]

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

There are three chief texts of Scripture, in which the teaching about absolution has its proper *sedes*; the first is Matthew 17, the second is Matthew 18, and the third is contained in our appointed Gospel lesson for this Sunday. Let me then now show you the basis of this last one:

How great and dangerous is that error, which deprives the preacher of the Gospel of the authority to forgive sins on earth.

On account of this error namely:

1. the clearest words of Christ are contradicted,
2. the complete redemption of Christ is denied, and finally
3. men are robbed of the highest and most needed comfort.

Lord Jesus Christ, You who has bestowed upon Your faithful the full consoling authority to absolve their brothers and sisters from their sins in Your name, and You who has to that end in particular established the office¹, which preaches reconciliation: graciously guard us, therefore, so that we do not self-righteously and arrogantly despise this, Your consoling institution, but let us perceive in it Your love for us sinners, and employ it for the comfort and well-being of our soul. To this end, bless our meditation today upon Your death and Your resurrection.

I.

That error, which deprives the preacher of the Gospel of the authority to forgive sins upon earth, is, my dear ones, greater than one may think and than one may generally assume, and indeed for the first reason that in so doing the most clear Words of Christ are contradicted.

This is entirely clear, for as we have heard in our Gospel, Christ spoke to the apostles after His resurrection: *“Whoever’s sins you absolve, they are absolved; and whoever’s sins you retain, they are also retained.”* Christ has also spoken the same to His disciples long before His death, first to Peter, and thereafter to all His disciples. To Peter He spoke: *“I will give you the keys to heaven. All, which you bind upon the earth, shall be bound also in heaven; and all, which you loose upon the earth, shall also be loosed in the heavens.”* And a few days afterward Christ repeated these Words again to all the disciples, as He spoke: *“Truly, I say to you: what you will bind upon the earth, shall also be bound in heaven; and what you will loose upon the earth, shall also be loosed in heaven.”*

Here the authority to forgive and retain sins is so clearly and distinctly ascribed to the Church and Her ministers that it requires no proof. All the same, that which deprives the Church of this authority, accordingly commits a great crime. They contradict the Son of God to His face and explain His words as a lie. They commit once more the sin into which Satan strove to entice the first couple, as he said to them, “Has God really said, ‘You should not eat of any tree in the garden?’”

The words of the Son of God are so lucid and powerful that the *Schwaermer*² often also seek to give the appearance that they also believe that the Office of the Keys may not become extinct. However, do not let yourself be deceived by such a misleading concession. One speaks namely, Christ has only here given the apostles the power to reveal the condition, under which a man acquires the forgiveness of sins or whereby he should be shut out. Who, however, has ever heard that the one who forgives a man his sins declares to him a contract under which he can acquire forgiveness? That one is not said to stand on the Word of Christ, but to refute it, not to

¹ Das Amt.

² Enthusiasts.

explain, but to change, not to open up His sweet consolation, but to remove and shut it up, with one word, to hold it in contempt and mockery and to tread it under the feet.

However, one says, where have the apostles absolved as the preacher of the Lutheran Church does? —Hereupon I answer: it is well true, that one may have no expressed instance from the time of the apostles, from which the binding absolution formula for the preacher may be picked out; it is well true, that one may have no confessional at that time, in which those who want to commune, may have hands laid upon their head, and in which the forgiveness of sins may be spoke upon their confession; however, although we may not find this same form, kind, method, and ceremony for the administration of the keys in the apostolic Church, we nevertheless still find the same point³. Consider, my dear ones, when the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: *“Do not let be led astray: neither fornicators, nor the idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals⁴, nor pedophiles⁵, nor thieves, nor coveters, nor drunkards, nor mockers, nor robbers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; however, you have been washed, you haven been sanctified, you have been made righteous through the name of the Lord Jesus, and through the Spirit of our God.”*—What is that other than a plain absolution, which Paul here speaks to the fallen, yet repentant Corinthians? Yes, so the holy apostles often assured the Christians: *“You are all children of God through the faith in Christ Jesus—by grace you have been saved”* and the like. How is that different from when the Lord spoke to the blind man: *“Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven”*? Consider further, when Ananias said to Saul: *“Be baptized, and wash away your sins.”* How is that different than if Ananias had said, *“Be absolved by me”*? The apostles themselves also expressly write about the authority to forgive sins, and they have also exercised the same authority with clear words. In the second letter to the Corinthians, we read in the second chapter that once an incestuous man in the Corinthian congregation had been so sternly disciplined in front of the whole congregation that he stood on the brink of despair. What does the holy Apostle Paul now do? He writes to the others in the congregation the following words: *“The punishment that has been inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man; so that you now, on the contrary, ought to forgive him so much the more, and comfort him, so that he is not swallowed up into too much sorrow. Therefore, I admonish you to demonstrate love for him. Now whom you forgive something, I also forgive. For also if I have forgiven anyone something, that I have forgiven for your sake, in the stead of Christ.”* Can it, my dear ones, be more plainly demonstrated that the holy apostles truly have [the authority] to forgive sins in the stead of Christ and the name of the congregation?

This testimony is so clear that on account of it even the many opponents of absolution themselves do not dare to deny that at least the holy apostle truly had and exercised the authority to forgive sins. However, one says, how will one show that the present-day preacher of the Gospel also has this authority? Does not Saint Paul himself proclaim in another place: *“Are all apostles”*? Hereupon I answer: It is true; there is a great difference between an apostle and a modern-day minister of the church. The apostle was infallible; the present-day church minister is not; the apostle has the authority to do miracles and to prophesy; the present-day church minister does not; the apostle was called directly by Christ, the Son of God, the modern-day church minister is called mediately through men; the apostle has the call to go into all the world, the modern-day church minister is limited to the field of their specific congregation. However, as the office itself is concerned, to preach the Gospel, there one finds no difference. Or did the word of the Lord: *“Preach the Gospel,”* apply only to the apostles? Did His command: *“Baptize them in*

³ Sache-thing, event, affair, matter, object, business, point.

⁴ Literally, weaklings or sissies.

⁵ Literally, boy-shamers.

the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” apply only to the Twelve? Or did the mandate: *“Do this in remembrance of me,”* apply only to the chosen disciples? No. Christ spoke to them expressly about those to whom they would preach: *“Teach them to hold to everything, which I have commanded you.”* It is therefore certain that each command, to teach, to baptize, and to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, has to do with the Church of all time, and so all of this, which was commanded to the disciples, should be retained, and so also the command together with the promise applies to the Church of all time until the end of days: *“Whoever’s sins you forgive, they are forgiven, and whoever’s sins you retain, they are retained.”* And so also the words of the eighteenth chapter of Matthew about the Christian and the congregation apply to all time: *“If your brother sins against you, so go to him and reprove him between the two of you alone; if he listens to you, you have thus won your brother over. If he does not listen to you, then take still another to go together with you. If he does not listen to you, then tell it to the congregation. If he does not listen to the congregation, then regard him as a heathen and a tax collector”*—so these words certainly apply to the Christians and congregations of all time, I say, and so also the following words straight away apply thereupon: *“Truly, I say to you, what you will bind upon the earth, I shall also bind in heaven, and what you also will loose upon the earth, I shall also loose in heaven.”*

There is and remains one greater, more detestable error, which deprives the preacher of the Gospel of the authority to forgive sins upon the earth. One may twist and turn it as he wants; yet, he still nevertheless commits a terrible sin, for he opposes Christ, the Son of God to His face and makes His Word into a lie.

II.

Yet, this error is also so great and destructive, because one thereby denies the complete redemption of Christ.

Indeed, my dear ones, the truth is not infrequently expressed by the enthusiast sectarian preachers⁶, that Christ has fully redeemed all men, yet thereby one may not allow himself to be deceived and persuaded that on account of this they also really believe and preach this truth. It is only too clear that they deny and oppose this truth, when they express it once, yet contradict it a thousand times through their entire method of instruction concerning the way to salvation. For what does that mean: Christ has fully redeemed us? That means: Christ has done and suffered all things for us, which we should have done and suffered, in order to be saved; we have no need to want to pay for our sins, Christ has already paid; we have no need to want to reconcile with God, Christ has already reconciled us with Him; we have no need to want to earn the grace of God, Christ has already earned it for us; we have no need to fulfill the law for our salvation, that too Christ has already fulfilled; we have no need to want to furnish righteousness which avails before God, Christ has already supplied it for us; we have no need to want to overcome death, the devil, and hell, Christ has already overcome them all for us; we have no need to want to acquire the worthiness for entrance into heaven, Christ has already obtained it; in short, we have no need to want to complete our salvation with a work, for Christ has already completed everything, He has already drunk the cup of the suffering we deserved down to the last drop, He has repaid our guilt before God down to the last penny, He has already done the will of God down to the last letter.

What now follows hereupon?—Hereupon it follows that this can also be preached to all men, yes, must be preached to all men, and that the Gospel even insists upon the fact that it is

⁶ Schwaermerischen Sectenpredigern

preached to all men. Be joyful, you sinners, Christ has already paid for your sins; Christ has already reconciled you with God; Christ has already obtained the grace of God for you; Christ has already fulfilled the law for you; Christ has already furnished a valid righteousness before God for you; Christ has already overcome death, hell, and the devil for you; Christ has already acquired for you the necessary worthiness for entrance into heaven; in short, Christ has already completed the work for your salvation! Nevermind, therefore, that you must first be reconciled with God through an affliction and repent of your sins; nevermind that you must obtain something before God for yourself through some good work, through your penance⁷, through your repentance, through your personal reformation⁸, through your struggle, that you must make yourself blessed through your grappling. No!—all this has already happened!—You should now do nothing other than accept that which Christ has already suffered and done for you, and has already granted, so that you may acquire that, so that you may trust the same, so that you may believe that, so that you may live and remain in this faith, and through this faith finally be saved and enter into heaven.

See hereupon, since Christ has fully redeemed all men, that, therefore, the entire Gospel is nothing other than a sermon about the forgiveness of sins or a proclamation of the same to all the men on earth, to which God Himself in heaven speaks the yes and amen; it is, in a word, a general absolution, spoken from heaven to the entire world, delivered through men, sealed with the blood and death of Christ and confirmed most magnificently and solemnly through His glorious resurrection by God Himself. And precisely because the Gospel is an absolution for all men, for it is the already accomplished and complete redemption of the world, so the preacher of the Gospel can and should assure each and every man who desires the forgiveness of sins as a poor sinner of the forgiveness of his sins in the name of God.

What else do those who deprive the preacher of the Gospel of the power to forgive sins upon earth do? They thereby deprive them of nothing less than the authority to preach the Gospel in its true sense to all men, and they consequently deny the full atonement of Christ, of which precisely the Gospel is the proclamation. Yes, faith in that complete redemption and the right understanding of the same is precisely what those who deny the power to forgive sins upon earth lack. How can he who believes from the heart that Christ has paid for the sins of all men, thereupon reject that a man, who confesses to believe on Christ, may be told by a preacher or a so-called layman: “Your sins are forgiven”? How can he who believes from the heart the Christ has obtained grace for all men, reject that a man, who confesses to believe thereupon, may not also be assured by a preacher or a Christian congregation: “You also have found grace”? How can he who believes from the heart that all men have been reconciled to the Father by the death of Christ and are righteous before God by His resurrection, that God has also suffered for the world, that He has already given His dear Son and has forgiven everything through His merits—how can he marvel that this may also be declared and guaranteed to a man in the name of God by a preacher or by a Christian brother through the absolution, and that nothing is demanded from him other than that he now also accordingly receive this in faith as if heard the voice of God Himself from heaven?!

Understand therefore: precisely because our Church has pure and undefiled and in its fullness the article that Christ has made complete atonement for all men and that, therefore, men are saved and justified by grace alone through faith, it has also firmly held the precious teaching of absolution from the beginning. And so long as this sun, namely the teaching of justification

⁷ Penance-Busse; repentance-Reue.

⁸ Betterment.

through faith alone, shines brightly in our Church and does not set, that long the same will not allow the comfort of absolution to be taken from her. Wherever, however, that sun does not shine, where the article of justification by grace alone through faith is not possessed in its purity, there hellish darkness must set in; there one inevitably denies the method and the power of absolution and, with it, the full redemption of Christ.

III.

But this error is now therefore finally so great, because it robs men of the highest and most necessary comfort. Of this allow me to speak to you still yet in a third point.

It certainly appears, as it remains, even if absolution were rejected, there is still always enough comfort for men. For do not the opponents of absolution also have the Gospel? Do they not also have Baptism? Do they not also have the Holy Supper? It is true, they have these things, if they do not also according to their custom deny and reject these things which have to do with the former [absolution]; but while they deny the power of absolution, they remove the comfort which lies in all the others. For what is the comfort that lies in the Gospel other than that the Gospel gives the forgiveness of sins to all who believe in it? What is the comfort that lies in Baptism other than that Baptism “works forgiveness of sin and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare?”⁹ Finally what is the comfort that lies in the Holy Supper other than that in it through these words “Given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins...we receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation?”¹⁰ This comfort, as the true grain, the opponents of absolution remove, as was said, from the all these means of grace and leave nothing to their hearers but the husks, as much as is in them.

Do not think that here I am casting the blame on the preachers of the sects for something of which they are not guilty. It is unfortunately only too true. Do they not pronounce it themselves publicly: Whoever relies on the mere Word has a dead faith? The letter kills, the Spirit, must not the Spirit be the one who makes alive? Do they not speak even so blasphemously of Holy Baptism? Do they not say: how should washing with water help you? This is a powerless ceremony; the Spirit, must not the Spirit do it? And finally do they not speak even so scornfully of the Holy Supper? Do they not say: how can the eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ be of use to you? You must drink of his Spirit, is that not the true nourishment of your soul?

Therefore, do not believe, dear hearers, that it is only a question of the denial of absolution, whether a preacher has the privilege to be able to say he words: “I forgive you your sins in Christ’s stead.” No, this denial has a deeper foundation. Here it is namely a question of whether the Word of God is not merely a directive to true Christianity and whether the Holy Sacraments are not merely powerless ceremonies, but whether both Word and Sacrament are really the means, the tools, the hands through which God offers, presents, and seals grace and forgiveness of sins to us. It is a question of whether man can really trust in the Word of the Gospel and in the promises bound to the Sacraments as on the voice of God Himself, even when our own heart and conscience speak otherwise inside of us and condemn us. Therefore, in a word, it is really a question of the highest and most necessary comfort for us sinful men.

⁹ Second Part of Baptism, Small Catechism

¹⁰ Second Part of Holy Communion, Small Catechism

Therefore, if the sects of our day want to deny this comfort, let us hold all the more strongly to it. If the falsely spiritual men want to despise us on account of it, let us not on account of it despise God who has granted us the means of healing and assurance of His grace. If the “enthusiastic” spirits trust in what they do, suffer, and experience, in their prayers, in their battles and struggles, in their self-denial, in the visions or apparitions they have, in their feelings and emotions, in their repentance and sanctification; we will trust in that which God has done for us and what He offers us with the hand of His Word and His Holy Sacraments, Holy Baptism and the Holy Supper.

Indeed, there is no doubt that there are very many dear children of God also among the sects. They stand with God in grace and will be saved one day, but they will not be saved by that which they takes pains to do, not through their many works, not through their prayers, deeds, comings and goings, but through this alone, that they find no rest in all these things and finally undress themselves naked and bare before God and trust alone on the Word of grace.

Therefore, let us not wait for this, until we perhaps first in our last hour throw away all our doings, all our works, and all our righteousness and worthiness and must hold fast to the Word and Sacraments alone. Let us already now make a beginning with this, to throw this weight from the ship of our heart, so that our little ship will not sink and go under in the storms of trouble and of death. Let us build on the Word, which announces grace to all in the sermon and grants it to us especially in the holy absolution. Let us build on our Baptism, in which we have already been adopted long ago in a covenant of God’s grace; for this covenant stands firm for us forever. Let us finally build on the comfort of the Holy Supper, as often as we take part in it. For there Christ gives us His body and His blood as an undeniable pledge that we also have a part in His redemption.

That gives comfort, which even then remains when our own heart condemns us. That gives comfort by itself in the hour of death when our entire life accuses us and the world and Satan appear against us. That gives comfort by itself on the Day of Judgment for what God Himself has promised, that He will and that He must keep.

His Word, His Baptism, His Meal
Serves in every ordeal,
Through them the Spirit must
Teach us in them to trust. Amen.