

Sermon – 08/08/21
(Office of the Keys)

Text – John 20:21-23

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send 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 retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Theme – “If You Forgive”

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

Last week our sermon was about Baptism, where God has made His own children, washing us clean of all our sins. When the person comes up out of that holy water of Baptism, he is a new creation, he is cleansed of all his sins, he is spotless and pure in God’s sight. But, sadly, none of us remain so clean and pure and sinless, do we? Just as we confess, we daily sin much and so are in need of forgiveness and cleansing, over and over again. So, what are we to do? Get baptized over and over again, each and every time we sin? No, there has to be another way for us to receive that forgiveness we all so desperately and daily need. And that brings us to the Fifth Chief Part of the Catechism: the Office of the Keys. (pause)

In our text we heard the risen Jesus say to His disciples in that locked Jerusalem room that He was giving them the authority to forgive and retain sins. First He breathed on them, imparting and giving them the Holy Spirit (remember, the Hebrew words for “breath” and “Spirit” are the same); then He entrusted them with what we Lutherans call the “Office of the Keys”. Simply put, Jesus has conferred upon His Bride, the Church, the power and authority which belong to Him: that of forgiving or retaining sins. To those who repent and put their faith in Christ’s work of redemption, the Church is to use the “unlocking” key: that is, the Church is to forgive their sins. But to those who refuse to repent, or

who deny/reject Christ's sacrifice for them, to them the Church must use that "locking" key by telling them that their sin (and its guilt and punishment) remain upon them.

And how does the Church exercise this Office of the Keys? Well, there are three main ways: through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God; through the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; and through confession and absolution. Let's deal with each of these in turn, beginning with the Word. (pause)

As I trust you all remember, God's Word can be divided into either Law or Gospel. The Law is that Word of God which tells us what He expects/demands/requires from us. The best and clearest examples of this Law are found in the Ten Commandments. There God lays out for us in clear, undeniable, inescapable ways just what He wants us to be: perfect, righteous, holy reflections of His sacrificial love. But, ever since the fall of Adam, we are NOT what that Law demands. Instead we are wicked, unclean, unloving and unlovable slaves to sin. We have no good in ourselves; we have no hope of heaven or God's reward on our own. We need a Savior, One who will rescue us from sin/death/devil. In short, the Law crushes us and drives us to despair of our righteousness; but this is all necessary before we can rightly hear and understand the second Word of God: the saving Gospel.

Of course, that Gospel is the Good News of God's undeserved love and grace to us in the Person and work of His own dear Son, Jesus Christ. You and I are sinners; you and I are slaves to Satan; you and I have no way of escaping hell and its eternal torments. But in mercy and love, God sent His Only-Begotten Son down from heaven to save us. He took on human flesh and blood, and all that goes along with being truly human. Jesus, true God and true Man, placed Himself under the Law for us. He lived the perfect life that we fail to lead, obeying every commandment every second of His life. Then He willingly went to the cross, where He suffered the full weight of our condemnation for us – Jesus literally and truly took our hell onto Himself so that we might be freed. As He said from that cross on

Good Friday: “It is finished!” meaning that He has accomplished **everything** for our salvation. He has reconciled us to God by His own Self-sacrifice, and God again receives us as His children for Jesus’ sake.

Now, when this Word of God is preached and taught to people, one of two things can happen: first, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, a person believes it. He sees his sin and need for a Savior; he confesses Jesus to be that very Savior; he repents of his sin and places his trust completely in Christ for him, knowing that he is reunited with God simply because of what Jesus has done for him. To such people the “unlocking key” must be applied: they are to hear the sweet Gospel of forgiveness and the absolution of God Himself – “your sins are forgiven you”.

But the second reaction to this Word is just the opposite. Some who hear of their sin deny it, minimize it, excuse it, even *glory* in it. Some who hear of their need for a Savior scoff and laugh. Some who hear of Jesus’ sacrifice for them reject it or disbelieve it. To such people the “locking key” must be applied: they are not to be absolved by the Gospel – they are not yet ready for it. Instead they must hear only the Law, which condemns them and “locks” heaven to them. Now, this second key does not mean we give up on these people; far from it. Instead it means we must lovingly present them with the Law and its demands, reminding them of their sin and need for a Savior. We must point them to their only hope: Jesus Christ, their Savior and ours. And if, by the grace of God, they eventually see their sin and need for Jesus, then with the greatest joy we use that wonderful “unlocking key” of the Gospel, which then opens heaven to them. (pause)

This same Office of the Keys is exercised in the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is easy to see the “unlocking key” being used here: in Baptism, all the person’s sins are washed away and so heaven stands wide open to him. The same thing in the Supper: we eat and

drink the Body and Blood of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, and so again Paradise is flung open to us.

But we need to recognize that the “locking key” is also there in the sacraments too. If one rejects the Gospel (or the Gospel as given in those sacraments) we cannot administer those sacraments to that person. For example, if someone rejects the Bible’s teaching on sin; or of forgiveness only through faith in Christ; or that God works through Baptism to give us new birth then obviously we cannot baptize that person. If someone denies that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present in the Lord’s Supper, to give us forgiveness, we cannot commune him. (pause)

There is yet another way in which the Church exercises this Office of the Keys, and that is through Confession/Absolution. Allow me to quote from the Catechism:

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command -- especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation – and, again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, that this is as valid and certain -- in heaven also -- as if Christ our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.

What we are saying here is that God has called His pastors to be His agents in hearing the confession of sins of His people, and then declaring to them His forgiveness in Christ Jesus. And when pastors do this, we are not to doubt as to whether or not it is certain but to trust it as the very word of Christ Himself. And this since it is Jesus who has called and placed that man in that office for that very purpose.

So, when a Christian is burdened by his conscience, when his sins weigh heavily upon him, whether it be one particular sin or sin in general, he has the blessing of being able to go to the pastor. To confess to him (or more correctly, to Christ). And to hear Jesus tell him personally, through the pastor’s voice, that he IS forgiven. All his sins. Even those that especially bother and worry him. And he can be certain and sure he is forgiven because the pastor is only acting on the authority – and command – of

Christ Himself. Obviously, if Jesus says you are forgiven then you ARE forgiven! And when the pastors says: “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” that means it IS Jesus talking. And forgiving.

Such confession and absolution may be done publicly (as we do in the worship service, when we speak together the General Confession and then hear the pastor absolve the entire congregation). In this case, we are confessing ALL those sins (known and unknown) which we have committed against God and man. And when the pastor speaks that word of forgiveness to the whole assembly, that means me too. Even especially me.

But confession and absolution may also be done privately and individually with the pastor. In this case, the person comes to the pastor with those particular sins which are bothering him and he confesses those sins. And then he is privileged to hear the forgiveness spoken to him personally, by name, and for those very sins with which the devil has been tormenting and accusing him. In a most marvelous and direct way, God lifts their burden from the person and instead gives him His peace. And we never have to worry the pastor will betray our sin to others; he cannot. He has taken a vow not to do so, for what is spoken in the confessional has been told to God, not the pastor.

What a treasure and joy are confession/absolution to a Christian! How wonderful to be able to speak to God about those sins which plague and trouble us, and then to hear the sure and certain word of forgiveness spoken by God’s representative, God’s agent, God’s voice: the pastor. (pause)

Now, so far we have talked about the exercise of the Office of the Keys in terms of public ministry: the preaching and teaching of God’s Word by the pastor; the administration of the sacraments by the pastor; absolution by the pastor, following the confession of sins. So, are we saying that *only* pastors exercise this Office? Simply put, no.

Pastors are called by God, through the congregation, to be the ones who publicly use these Keys in the manner we have seen. That means when there is a worship service, it is the pastor who preaches. Unless it is an emergency, it is the pastor who baptizes. When the Lord's Supper is served, it is the pastor who does so. When someone seeks to hear God's forgiveness for particular sins, he goes to the pastor for confession/absolution. But all these are the **public** ministry; there are times, however, when the Keys are used in private settings, and then it is not only appropriate and permissible, but even **necessary**, for each Christian to use those Keys.

Each of us has the obligation to call one another to repentance when we sin – using the “locking” key of the Law. Each of us has the privilege to forgive (the “unlocking” key of the Gospel), and to announce Christ's absolution, when a sinner repents. We are ALL to speak God's Word to our neighbor, not just pastors. In case of emergency **any** Christian can baptize. As God's people, His children, priests of our Father, we are all blessed – and called – to speak for Him in the relationships and stations into which He has placed us. (pause)

How blessed we are to have those Keys entrusted to us. How wonderful it is to have heaven opened to us in the preaching of the Word, in the Sacraments, in confession/absolution! Yes, we daily sin much and so are in need of forgiveness – but God gives that very forgiveness to us here, in these Means of Grace. As the Church uses those Keys, heaven is unlocked and wide open to us. All because of Christ. Thanks be to God for this incredible gift! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Wed – Hymn
OS – Offertory/Offering
FE – Nicene Creed