

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Wherever Jesus went, people came to Him for healing and restoration. In our Gospel Lesson this morning, Jesus comes back to His home base of Capernaum. Word gets out that Jesus is home, so after a few days people began crowding the house to hear His preaching (Mark 2:2). Some came to Jesus with a paralytic man lying on a bed. In Mark and Luke, we learn that the place was so crowded, these people had to lower their paralyzed friend through the roof to have an audience with Jesus. They brought their friend to Jesus in faith, believing Jesus would heal the paralyzed man. Instead of granting their wish right away, Jesus says: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” At first it might seem like Jesus is saying to the paralyzed man something like: “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” but without giving him what he needs for the body, as St. James warns us about (James 2:16). It might seem like Jesus is loving in word or talk but not in deed and truth (1 John 3:18). But what Jesus is getting at is in fact the most important thing. We come to Jesus with our own expectations about what He should do, and Jesus responds with what we need more than anything: forgiveness of sins.

Part of the crowd present that day included Pharisees and teachers of the Law who had come from every village of Galilee and Judah, and from Jerusalem (Luke 5:17). When these religious leaders heard Jesus forgiving the sins of the paralyzed man, they thought to themselves: “This man is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 2:7). In a sense they were right. Ultimately only God can forgive sins. God is the one who says: “I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Is 43:25). In Psalm

103[:3], David blesses the LORD “who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.” When we sin, even against other people, we are actually sinning against God because we are breaking God’s Law (Gen 39:9; Ps 51:4). If every sin is a sin against God, then only God can forgive sins. The teachers of the Law were right about that.

However, what the teachers of the Law did not understand is that Jesus is, in fact, God. We touched on this last Sunday when Jesus forced the Pharisees to confront the fact that He is both David’s Son and David’s Lord. The eternal Word of God, the Second person of the Holy Trinity, took our humanity upon Himself to redeem us. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Son of God became the son of man. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. And as God, Jesus is able in Himself to forgive sins, because all sins are committed against Him. In Jesus Christ, God became man to take our sins and iniquities upon Himself. He then canceled the record of debt that stood against us, setting it aside and nailing it to the cross (Col 2:14). There, upon the cross, God shed His blood for us to redeem us, to buy us back from our bondage to sin. In His death and resurrection, Jesus secured for us an eternal redemption, a freedom from the captivity of sin. Jesus can say to the paralyzed man: “Your sins are forgiven” because Jesus is the one who purchased that forgiveness and canceled that debt of sin. Only God can forgive sins, and He did that by becoming man to die for the sins of the world.

Jesus knew what the scribes were thinking, so He asks them: “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” Of course, it’s easier to *say* “Your sins are forgiven.” Sin is a matter of the heart. It is invisible, even though we see its effects bubble to the surface. The disease is invisible, and so is the cure. It would be easy to say “Your sins are forgiven,” even if they were not, because you don’t necessarily see the effects of forgiveness. The results of forgiveness of sins are internal and in

many ways will only be experienced at the Resurrection of the dead. Then we will experience firsthand that where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation. Where sin is no more, there is also no more sickness and death, no more pain and guilt. The complete effects of forgiveness will only be experienced in eternity.

So to prove He is not lying or merely talking piously about forgiveness here, Jesus says: “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” and turning to the paralytic man He says: “Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And the paralytic man got up and went home. The Son of Man proves He is the Son of God, the creator of all things, by restoring creation. This man was paralyzed because of sin—not necessarily because of some specific sin he committed, but as a result of the sin that infects all creation. Jesus forgives this man his sins and as proof that He is able to forgive sins, Jesus heals the paralyzed man. Jesus restores this one little part of His creation to prove that He is the God who both creates and redeems. Through Jesus all things were created, and through Jesus all things are being recreated.

“When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” The crowds were afraid because they realized they were in the presence of the eternal God, the one who can destroy both soul and body in Hell (Matt 10:28). Our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29) who cannot abide sin, or sinners, in His presence. Our perfectly holy God does not tolerate unholiness; He destroys it. Sinners tremble before the almighty LORD of the universe. Yet the crowd also glorified God. They praised the LORD who as a man has the authority to heal broken bodies as well as broken souls. Jesus miraculously makes the paralyzed man walk again, but more importantly, Jesus forgives the man His sins, saying: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus, the God-man, has authority to forgive sins. And Jesus, the God-man, gives that authority to forgive sins to His Church on earth, even today. The authority God gives man to forgive sins is not abstract; it is not make-believe or simply a manner of speaking. No, the forgiveness we receive in the Church is real and concrete and it comes to us in physical ways. God gives the authority to forgive sins to men, to the Church. In Matthew 16 and 18, this authority to forgive sins is described in terms of keys: one key opens, the other key closes. Jesus says: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Those who continue in unbelief and unrepentance are not forgiven. They remain chained to their sins. But all who repent of their sins are to be absolved, that is, set free from the guilt of their sin.

This office of the keys, the authority to forgive and retain sins, is given by Christ to the entire Church, but it is carried out publicly by pastors, the called ministers of Christ. After His resurrection from the dead, Jesus breathed on His disciples 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” (John 20:22–23). When pastors exclude the openly unrepentant and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself. The absolution spoken on earth is the same verdict spoken in heaven: not guilty.

You experience this absolution, this forgiveness of sins, every Sunday at the beginning of the Divine Service. Together we confess our sins before God, admitting that we deserve nothing but God’s punishment here in time and there in eternity. We deserve Hell. Yet we pray that our gracious God would be merciful to us for the sake of Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for us. And then God responds to us with His word of Absolution, with the forgiveness of sins spoken

through the pastor: “in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ *I* forgive you all your sins.” Not I, by my own authority, but on the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. The pastor only stands here and forgives your sins as an ambassador of Christ (2 Cor 5:20), a diplomat of Heaven. The Son of man, Jesus, has authority on Earth to forgive sins, and Jesus gives that authority to His Church to be carried out publicly by pastors.

Another place you can experience this absolution, this forgiveness of sins, is privately in individual confession and absolution. You can find the whole rite on page 292 in the hymnal. Sometimes you might hear the general absolution spoken every Sunday at the beginning of the Divine Service, but in reality you become distracted and your mind is far away. Or you might think: “Yes, I believe in forgiveness, but if only they knew what I really did, or what I really said, or what I really thought, then Pastor wouldn’t be so quick to forgive me. That forgiveness might apply to everyone else, but not for me.” For those who are burdened by the weight of specific sins and for those who want the personal assurance of forgiveness, pastors offer individual confession and absolution. A Lutheran pastor is bound by his ordination vows to never speak a word of anything confessed to him. When you tell a pastor your sins and receive the absolution, those sins are removed from you as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12). The forgiveness the pastor speaks to you is just as valid and certain as if Christ Himself stood before your very eyes, placed his hands on your head, and said: “I forgive you all your sins.” There’s nothing to be afraid of here! We can only glorify God that He has given such authority to men!

Jesus forgives the paralytic man before healing him to show us that forgiveness is the one thing that is truly necessary. Without forgiveness of sins, we would go through life with a guilty conscience before perishing eternally. But with the forgiveness of sins won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ in His death on the cross, our consciences are set free and we are given new life here

in time before we enter into eternal life. The treasure of absolution cannot be esteemed highly enough, as Luther says in his Exhortation to Confession: “If this were explained in detail and if the need that ought to move and lead us to make confession were pointed out, then one would need little urging or coercion. For everyone’s own conscience would so drive and disturb him that he would be glad to do what a poor and miserable beggar does when he hears that a rich gift of money or clothing is being handed out at a certain place. So as not to miss it, he would run there as fast as he can.” The need is certainly there, because we sin every day. We stand as poor and miserable beggars before God. So when you feel the weight of your sin, come to the treasure God freely gives to you in Holy absolution. When you hear those words: “I forgive you all your sins,” you can be certain it is our Lord Jesus Christ speaking His forgiveness to you through the mouth of the pastor. Take heart! Your sins are forgiven. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.