

Matthew 9:1–8
19th Sun. after Trinity
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
October 15, 2023

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,

“When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” That’s the last verse of our Gospel text today, the conclusion of this entire account where a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus for healing, but instead Jesus begins by forgiving His sins. The man’s physical healing comes only as proof that Jesus does, in fact, have the authority to forgive sins. The paralytic was healed. He got up and walked home. And the crowds feared God and gave God the glory, because He had given such authority to men.

At first we might think the crowds marveled at the miracle, which they did. Who wouldn’t marvel at that?! But the even greater miracle is the one that’s not visible, the miracle of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus heals the paralytic to show that He also has the authority to forgive sins. This is why the crowds are afraid and glorify God: because God has given man the authority to forgive sins. Today we consider how that same authority to forgive and retain sins, the Office of the Keys, has been given to the Church.

When Jesus saw the faith of the people who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus, that they trusted in His mercy, He said to the paralytic: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” Presumably these friends brought the paralyzed man to Jesus for healing. They heard reports of what Jesus could do or they even witnessed for themselves our Lord’s miracles. They must have expected Jesus to do one of two things: either Jesus would heal the man or He would not. But at least it would be worth a try. One of the last things they must have expected was for Jesus to turn

the focus towards the forgiveness of sins first, and only then address the need for physical healing.

For Christians today, the tendency might be to take the forgiveness of sins lightly. It could come across as a given: Of course Jesus forgives sins! That's what it's all about. We sometimes forget what a radical concept forgiveness really is. Some of the scribes standing around took notice and quietly accused Jesus of blasphemy. The same thing happens today when non-Lutherans attend a Lutheran service and are confronted with Confession and Absolution. If you're used to it every week, the confession of sins at the beginning of the service might just seem like a nice way of preparing ourselves to enter God's presence. We confess our sins and receive forgiveness from the pastor as from God Himself. For many on the outside, this is an unusual or even blasphemous act, that a man, the pastor, would dare stand in front of you and say: "I forgive you all your sins." But only God can forgive sins, they say. How can a sinful man presume to stand in God's place?

Of course, the scribes don't believe Jesus is God, so they don't believe He can forgive sins. But Christians know better. Jesus is God, so for Him it makes sense to forgive sins. He is God in the flesh, God become man to lead man back to God in His death and resurrection. Jesus is perfect God and perfect man, so of course He can forgive this man His sins. He came to take away the sins of the world with His life. But how could sinful men stand in the place of Jesus and forgive sins?

If it weren't for the words and promises of God, these scoffers would be correct: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus is God and He paid for all sins at the cross, so He can forgive sins, but what about the forgiveness spoken by the pastor or by other Christians? In Matthew 16:19, Jesus says to Peter, a sinful man: "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.” Jesus says the same thing to all the disciples, indeed, to the entire church, in Matthew 18:18: “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus to call a sinner to repentance, there is Jesus among them, working through His Word, to retain the sins of those who do not repent and to forgive the sins of those who do repent. Jesus, the God-man, has given this authority to men.

It’s not as though the church is left to make up its own standards when commanded to retain or forgive sins. The church is given God’s Word as the measure of doctrine and life. What we teach and how we live are always to be measured against the standard of God’s Word. When we fall short, we are called to repentance, to turn from our evil ways that we might live. And that new life God has prepared for us comes in the Absolution, in the forgiveness of sins. When hardened sinners refuse to repent, when they can’t acknowledge their sinful ways and reject all admonishment, then Jesus says to let them be to us like Gentiles and tax collectors. Avoid them, lest you, too, become partakers in their sinful ways. On the other hand, sinners who are humbled by God’s Law and desire forgiveness are to be forgiven without ceasing. The forgiveness of sins for those who repent is limitless.

This “office of the keys,” as it is called, is given to the entire church but it is administered publically by the called and ordained servants of Christ, by pastors. In John 20, the resurrected Jesus appeared to His disciples, 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.” Like the entire church, the pastor is not left to his own devices when it comes to retaining and forgiving sins. As a pastor, I can only judge according to God’s Word, not according to my own

opinions and feelings. When a repentant sinner comes to confession, I forgive not on my own authority, but on the authority Christ has given to me. When unrepentant sinners are admonished according to God's Word, their sins are retained not by my own authority, but by the authority Christ has given to me.

The goal is to comfort scared and weak sinners with the Gospel of free forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and to lead unrepentant sinners to repentance, that they, too, might receive new life in Jesus. None of this rests on the pastor's own authority. That's why I say: "As a called and ordained servant of Christ and by His authority, I forgive you all your sins." God has indeed given this authority to men, as ambassadors of the King of Kings, that the powerful Word of God might be active in judging the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Jesus knows everything you do, everything you say, everything you think, and even the subconscious desires you aren't even aware of. As an example of this, our text says that Jesus knew the thoughts of the scribes. He says: "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" So bring everything to Jesus with confidence, knowing that He knows you better than you know yourself.

One of the most underutilized resources in the church is private confession and absolution. Every Sunday we confess our sins before God, even allowing time for silent reflection on specific sins in our lives and for self-examination. This is a good practice. In fact, we even confess that there are sins we've committed of which we aren't even aware. We also seek forgiveness for these sins. But for the sins you know and feel in your heart, the sins that haunt you daily or that you just can't seem to shake, private confession is the best remedy.

Telling another person what's going on helps to ease the burden, and the pastor can also give you advice on practical steps going forward. At a Lutheran ordination, the pastor vows to never divulge what is confessed to him. The sins go into the pastor's ear and they die there. Then

Christ speaks through the pastor, as he lays his hands on the penitent's head, saying: "I forgive you." When you get a chance, look at p. 292 in the hymnal to see how private confession works. And then resolve to give it a try. The thought might be scary at first, but there's nothing more freeing than hearing the forgiveness of Christ applied directly to the sins you're struggling with. And if you're not sure you even know how to begin, the form in the hymnal helps walk you through it and get you started.

Jesus asks the question: Which is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say "Rise, and walk"? To say "your sins are forgiven" seems easier, because with forgiveness, there aren't necessarily tangible results, like when a paralyzed man is able to walk again. Or at least there aren't tangible results yet. In eternity, in your resurrected bodies, there will certainly be tangible effects of the forgiveness of sins. And even now you can be at rest and have a still mind, knowing you have peace with God and peace with those around you. Although it's easy to just say "you're forgiven," when you understand that forgiveness is based on the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, you realize how much forgiveness actually costs, that its worth is eternal. And to show that Jesus, the Son of Man, has authority on earth to forgive sins, He said to the paralyzed man: "Rise, pick up your bed and go home." And the man got up and went home.

The crowds were afraid and glorified God, who had given such authority to men. Jesus, the God-man, has authority to forgive sins because He is God and because He paid for those sins with His life. He proves it throughout the Scriptures. And then Jesus gives that authority to forgive sins to His church on earth, entrusting it in particular to the called ministers of the Gospel, the stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1). Don't neglect the gifts of confession and absolution God gives you in abundance at this very moment. Confess your sins to God, to

your pastor, and to one another. God is faithful. He will forgive your sins, as promised, and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. And when your sins and your unrighteousness are removed, then you will truly have life and salvation. 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.