

“Singing the Faith – Confession”

“O Lord open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise.” This evening we sing of the Lord’s gift of Holy Absolution – as we sing Dr. Martin Luther’s catechetical hymn on Confession – “As Surely as I Live,” God Said. In this hymn, as well as in the Small Catechism – Luther has Private Confession & Absolution in mind – when he speaks of Confession.

The Confession & Absolution that we are most familiar with is the General Confession & Absolution with which we begin the Divine Service. That’s what we grew up with. That’s what we are used to.

We may not be comfortable with Private, or Individual Confession & Absolution – confessing specific sins and receiving absolution for those specific sins – yet, it goes hand in hand with being a Lutheran.

In the Large Catechism, Luther writes: “When I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian.” Going to confession is not a “Roman Catholic thing” – it’s not some quaint practice from “old-time Lutheranism” --- its supposed to be a natural part of our lives.

It flows right out of being baptized – living in daily contrition and repentance. It is a practice that is very beneficial for the life of faith. As Lutherans, we adhere to the Augsburg Confession, which states: “It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse.”

I have heard many a proud Lutheran declare – “I don’t HAVE to go to confession” – and that’s true – Private Confession & Absolution is not mandated by Christ. But it is the Gospel, and who wouldn’t want to receive the Gospel?

In his day, Luther lamented the fact that men had learned the Gospel “only too well” – that they took advantage of the freedom of the Gospel to do whatever they wanted, acting as if they no longer needed what the Lord offers in confession.

He writes in the Large Catechism: “We quickly understand whatever benefits us, and we grasp with uncommon ease whatever in the Gospel is mild and gentle. But such

pigs, as I have said, are unworthy to appear in the presence of the Gospel or to have any part of it. They ought to remain under the pope and submit to being driven and tormented to confess, fast, etc., more than ever before. For he who will not believe the Gospel, live according to it, and do what a Christian ought to do, should enjoy none of its benefits. What would happen if you wished to enjoy the Gospel's benefits but did nothing about it and paid nothing for it? For such people we shall provide no preaching, nor will they have our permission to share and enjoy any part of our liberty, but we shall let the pope or his like bring them back into subjection and coerce them like the tyrant he is. The rabble who will not obey the Gospel deserve just such a jailer as God's devil and hangman."

Having vented his anger and frustration concerning the trampling of the Gospel, Luther continues: "To others who hear it gladly, however, we must always preach, exhorting, encouraging, and persuading them not to lose this precious and comforting treasure which the Gospel offers. Therefore we must say something about confession to instruct and admonish the simple folk."

"As surely as I live," God said, I would not see the sinner dead. I want him turned from error's ways, repentant, living endless days." Here is where our instruction begins. God desires not the death of the sinner – but that he repent and live.

That is why Christ has given the command to preach His Word to the ends of the earth – so that by the preaching of His Law and His Gospel – the sinner, in repentance, might be turned from death to life.

Private Confession & Absolution is the preaching of God's Law and Gospel – applied specifically, to the individual. So that we might treasure this Gospel gift – it's vital that we see who has given this gift to the Church. St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: "The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples 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.'"

[We sing stanzas 5 & 6 of LSB 614]

The Small Catechism asks – “What do you believe according to these words?” – that is, the words from St. John the Evangelist in chapter twenty. Answer? “I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular, when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation 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.”

Why would anyone want to confess their sins to their pastor – especially those sins which they know and feel in their hearts – those sins they are ashamed of, and don’t want anyone to know? And why confess to the pastor – can we just confess our sins to God?

It is precisely because they burden you that leads you to confess them. As King David writes in Psalm 32 (you remember King David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed, and the tried to keep his sin covered up). It’s David who says in Psalm 32 – “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” That’s why one should confess their sins – because they burden you.

And why confess your sins to your pastor? Well, if in your mind that means confessing your sins to Scott Porath – then you might as keep them to yourself – because only God can forgive sin. But God has given you a pastor who God Himself has commanded to stand in His place and has ordered him to forgive the sins of repentant sinners.

“The minister whom Christ has sent is but His humble instrument. When ministers lay on their hands, absolved by Christ the sinner stands.” “Says who?” Says Christ!

Dearly beloved, I realize that Private Confession & Absolution has not been a part of your lives. I know that when you think about it, your focus is mainly on the Confession part. But it is for the sake of the Absolution that this practice is to be retained in the Church. It is the good news of sins forgiven. It is to hear Christ Himself forgive those sins that burden you.

I want you to know that Private Confession & Absolution are available from your pastor. When you are plagued by sin – when you hunger and thirst for relief – come and say, “Pastor, will you hear my confession?”

I encourage you to look at the Rite of Individual Confession & Absolution in our hymnal (LSB 292). If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

It is for the sake of the Gospel, the good news of sins forgiven in Christ, sinners set free to live – that Private Confession & Absolution continues to be practiced in Christ’s Church.

“As surely as I live,” God said, “I would not see the sinner dead. I want him turned error’s ways, repentant, living endless days.”

[We sing stanzas 7 & 8]