

Jesus teaches us today what our basic, fundamental need is. He does it in a powerful way, because if we were there to see the event recounted in today's Gospel, we would likely miss it. A paralytic, a man who is unable to stand up and walk, is brought to Jesus. He cannot work. He cannot run or play with his children. He cannot hug his wife. If you were disabled in the ancient world you were for the most part good as dead. Your only livelihood came from a family that would be willing to take care of you, or the charity of others. What does he need? Jesus says it's forgiveness.

Every physical or mental affliction, every illness, every sense or limb that does not work is a reminder of our need for forgiveness. That is not to say that because you said a swear word yesterday you will get a hangnail today. It doesn't work like karma. But illnesses are a reminder of our sinful condition. Before the fall into sin there was no sickness, no injury, no death. The fall into sin has subjected all of creation to pain, sickness, and suffering. These things are all reminders of the fact that we live in a fallen world, and that our whole selves are affected by sin. And then of course there are our actual sins. We heard the Ten Commandments in today's Old Testament reading. We are to learn them by heart so that we can examine our lives every day, and especially in preparation to receive the Sacrament. When we examine our lives honestly, on the basis of God's Law and all that it commands, we realize that we daily sin much. Our world, our lives, our sins remind us daily of our need for forgiveness.

We confess our need for forgiveness in both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds. *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins...I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church, I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins...* We confess our belief in the forgiveness of sins. But that our sins are forgiven, actually, truly, really, is what we so often doubt. The greatest thing we need, what demands relief of all others, is what is called into question by the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh.

Just as our sins are personal, we know them, we commit them, they affect us, they bother and trouble us, they bring us anguish, so also forgiveness is personal. Our need for forgiveness, and our doubts, our struggle to believe that we are forgiven is personal. At times it can be gut-wrenching. It is personal.

Because when you are troubled by what you have done, when you are afraid of God's anger, His wrath and eternal punishment for your sin, a generic idea of forgiveness isn't going to cut it. It is not comforting to such a person to hear "Well God forgives." Of course He does. We know that. The sinner, however, needs to hear, "God forgives you!" That is how Jesus deals with sinners. He tells the paralytic, "**Your sins are forgiven.**" Jesus forgives people of their sins. With forgiveness comes salvation, eternal life. He shows that He has the authority to do this, because He not only forgives sin, through His miracles He undoes sin's effects. He forgives the paralytic of his sins, and so that it would be known "**that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,**" He tells the paralytic to "**Rise, pick up [his] bed and go home**" (Matt 9:6). It is a sign, a down-payment, of the promise of the resurrection, the full restoration of body as well as soul. The day will come when the forgiveness Jesus gives to sinners will be fully and completely manifest in their bodies.

The word of forgiveness is personal, and it comes from outside ourselves. It is a Word directed to us. That is important. Because one of the most common phrases we hear is downright wrong. It is the idea of forgiving yourself. We hear it all the time, "I just don't know if I can forgive myself." Of course you can't! You don't bestow salvation upon yourself. It is a gift of God. It is a word that He speaks. It comes not from within yourself, it comes from outside of you, to you. It happens not just up there in the mind of God, it is spoken, given, to you by God.

But how does this happen? Did you notice the end of the Gospel reading? The crowds see Jesus forgive and heal the paralytic, we are told "**they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority,**" that is, the authority to forgive sins, "**to men.**" Notice, it does not say, "to a man." It says "to men." God's authority to forgive sins is given to men.

The Lord has ascended into heaven. He does not walk about Omaha as He did in first century Galilee and Judea. But He has called men to speak not their own words, but Christ's. On the evening of the first Easter Jesus appeared to the eleven and said, "**As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you...Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld**" (Jn 20:21-23).

Before His ascension into heaven the Lord charged the disciples to preach “**repentance and forgiveness of sins**” in His name, that is, with His authority (Lk 24:47).

Pastors are not tasked to talk about Jesus, or about the forgiveness of sins. Their divine charge, the office into which they are placed by Christ, is to speak Jesus’ words, to actually deliver Christ’s forgiveness to repentant sinners. It has not changed since our Lord’s ministry two thousand years ago. It is still His ministry, His service. He still speaks His Word of forgiveness with a human voice. There are many who deny this. Many Christians reject that pastors are given the authority to speak Christ’s own words, and that when this is done, it is with Christ’s authority. It’s ironic really. Because those who deny this quote the Bible, but who do they quote? The Pharisees who object to what Jesus does: “**This man is blaspheming.**” Or as they say in the Gospel of Mark, “**Who can forgive sins but God alone?**” (Mk 2:7).

Only God can forgive sins. It is a Word only He can speak. He speaks this Word through and by His Son, God in human flesh, who shed His blood for all sin. It is an authority which He possesses. But we see it stated clearly in Holy Scripture: this authority is given to men. We see Jesus give this charge, to speak His Words to His people. He gives this charge to His apostles and to those who follow in their office. This is what we confess in the Catechism:

What is the Office of the Keys?

The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

It then asks us what we believe according to the Words of John 20, when Jesus appeared to the Eleven on Easter: *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.*

Are you troubled by your sins? Do you want to know that God has forgiven you, of all your sins, of that particular sin which nags your conscience? Do you want to know that you can be absolutely certain of this, free from any need to doubt? Look not towards yourself, but to where Christ gives His divine Word of forgiveness, where He still speaks. This happens in so many ways, in so many places. You can look to your baptism. Where God claimed you as His own. Where the words that were said of our Lord Jesus Christ at His baptism, where He was joined to those waters, were said of you: “**This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased**” (Matt 3:17). You hear the absolution at the beginning of the Divine Service. You hear the sweet word of the Gospel in Bible Class, in the Scripture readings, in the sermon. You hear it when you are speaking with your fellow Christians, your brothers and sisters in Christ, and as you share your life’s troubles, they speak the promises of God’s Word to you.

You hear it as Jesus says that the bread and wine on this altar is His body and blood. This very body which was given into death for you, the true blood which was shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins, is given to you to eat and drink. This is why when a member is sick, especially when they have to be hospitalized, I visit them and conduct a brief form of the Divine Service, beginning with the confession and absolution, and culminating in the Holy Communion. When you are frail, those are the words you need to hear. When you are sick, Christ’s body and blood is the greatest medicine you can receive.

And for those particular times when your sins grieve you, where when you hear the general absolution you are left wondering, “Are those words for me too?” You have the gift, yes, the gift, the treasure, of individual absolution. There you can confess your sins in general, that is perfectly fine, or you can be quite specific, and you will hear Christ’s Word of forgiveness spoken to you, for your ears and no one else’s. When you have become the devil’s target, and Satan is accusing you, I implore you to not be satisfied with trying to deal with it on your own, do not try to convince yourself all on your own that you are forgiven but are left always wondering, “Am I really?” Call your pastor. Come to church. Unburden what troubles you. Confess your sins and your desire to hear Christ’s Word. And it will be my joy to speak not my own words but Christ’s. It is a pastor’s greatest joy to say in the stead and by the divine command of Christ, “Son/daughter, take heart, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus has given such authority to men. It is His own authority. It is His authority to deliver what you and I need the most. What we cannot give or do for ourselves is what He desires to give.