

## Lutheran Words: "Absolution"

Matt. 18:15-20

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Our Lutheran word for the day is **absolution**. It really is a beautiful word. It almost sounds clean and pure. According to Wikipedia, *absolution is a freeing from blame or guilt; release from consequences and obligations*. In ordinary language, it is a **ticket to get out of jail. Or to be more pointed, to get out of hell**. Our word absolution has a first cousin, a similar word in the same word family, "**ablution**," it means to wash, to be washed clean. That raises up the image of Holy Baptism, where we are indeed washed clean of the stains of sin and drawn in the family of God. It's really all of one cloth, an unbroken assurance that though our sins are as scarlet, yet we shall be whiter than snow.

Now if you are a born and raised Lutheran and worshiped in Lutheran Churches all your life, you probably don't have a second thought when our worship service always begins with a "*get out of jail*" pass. **We call it confession and absolution**. We remind ourselves that we are under condemnation, that it has been that way since we were born, that not just our deeds condemn us but also our thoughts and words. What we do and what we fail to do. We are often encouraged to pause and reflect upon that, to get more specific and really think for a moment about particular sins rather than just paint it with a broad brush, as in "*Yes, I'm a sinner. Who isn't?*"

One **form of our liturgical confession** says that when we really do that, think specifically about our transgressions, about all the ways we hurt each other and offend God, and about the logical consequence of that condition, that we will be miserable! We are miserable sinners, lost and condemned creatures. Do your sins make you feel miserable? Should they? If not, why not? Why is it that we can so often and so easily gloss over our sins with nary a second thought? Is this perhaps one of our greater sins? That we think of sin so lightly that it hardly makes an impression, much less make us miserable.

But if the weight of your sin is heavy, if the stain is deep, if you cry with Lady Macbeth, "*out, out, damned spot*" and it remains, then you know why **the word absolution is such a beautiful word, why it almost sounds clean and pure**.

Your pastor stands before you and says you are absolved, he declares your sins forgiven, free from all blame and guilt, free from all consequences and obligations. Oops! What a minute. This is where Wikipedia fall a little short, or goes a little too far. The absolution that your pastor offers frees you from blame and guilt before God, but not free of all earthly consequences. Get out of hell? Yes. Get out of jail. Not necessarily.

Like I said, if you are a life-long Lutheran you probably don't give this a part of our liturgy a whole lot of thought. But I can tell you that a lot of people when first experiencing Lutheran worship find it surprising. Some are shocked. Some are confused, and some, when they discover that it is done Sunday after Sunday, every Sunday, they find it tedious. As in, *"Why do you Lutherans have to wallow in your guilt every Sunday? I like to feel good about myself."*

The inference is *"this is not psychologically therapeutic. This damages my self-esteem."* Poor miserable sinner? Says who? Compared to whom?

**But are they not really listening?** Do they get so caught up in mulling about their guilt that they don't hear the beauty and comfort of absolution? They are declared free! Guiltless! Able to stand before the throne of the Almighty without any fear! We stand before God and say, *"just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me! All our guilt is placed upon the broad shoulders of a crucified Christ! What can give me more self-esteem than to know that I am counted as a child of God! I have been adopted into the family of the Almighty! Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that absolved a wretch like me! Absolution, what a lovely word!*

Again, if you are life-long Lutheran you probably don't think much about it, but those new to our tradition often **question the authority of any human being to declare someone free, or guiltless before God.** But the pastor claims no power of his own. These comforting words are not spoken under his authority. Indeed, who is he? Who am I to forgive sin? **It is a power given to the Church, the Holy Christian Church, the Holy Catholic Church.** In John 20 Jesus speaks to his disciples and says, *"If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven!"* The pastor, called and ordained, speaks in behalf of the Church, under the authority of Jesus. As Luther says, *"you can't absolve yourself! Someone has to absolve you"*

Luther's catechism **calls this the Office of the Keys**, The authority to unlock the gates of heaven by the pronouncement of absolution. When you hear

these words spoken, don't focus on the pastor. Rather, envision Jesus himself standing before you. It is his word that is spoken, with His authority.

Luther felt so strongly about this that he **considered it as third Sacrament**. As in Baptism we are washed clean and made part of the family of God, As in Holy Communion we receive, under the bread and wine, his Body and Blood for forgiveness of sin, so in Confession and Absolution we are assured that our guilt is removed and we are free.

**Up to this point I have been talking about the formal, liturgical experience of confession and absolution**, that which happens on Sunday morning (or Saturday evening) in the context of a gathered community of believers. **Our text from Matt. 18, however, is a talking about a more intimate, personal experience of confession and absolution.** It reminds us that our sin is not abstract, that is cannot be generalized. We sin against God by sinning against our neighbors, against the members of our family. Most of our sin is up close and personal.

The text says that *if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone!* Now this obviously assumes that what should have been happening hasn't happened. Example, Jacob and Esau in Gen. 32

What should have been happening is that these two brothers, or sisters, or neighbors were aware of the offense between them and that the guilty party should have acknowledged his guilt, asked for forgiveness and he should have been promptly and sincerely forgiven, absolved. No more problem!

The passage goes on to **describe a procedure** to follow if this has not been done, a way to try to bring the matter to resolution. You talk about it between yourselves, and if you can't make progress you ask fellow believers to help, to be good listeners, objective fact-finders and encouragers. **The point is that Christians dare not let problems between themselves lay open and fester like an infected sore. We are to practice confession and absolution.**

Now folks, it's time to be honest. We don't do this very well. We find it very difficult to acknowledge that we were wrong, and we often find it even more difficult to truly absolve someone, to forgive someone and be done with it. We would much rather hold onto these offenses so that we can remind the person, again and again, of how deeply we have been hurt, so that we can feel justified if we can find a way to get even, tit for tat, eye for eye.

I used to tell couples in pre-marital counseling that the **three most important words in marriage** are not "*I love you*," "*but* " "*I am sorry*" and "*I*

*forgive you."* Real absolution. It's done and we are not going to talk about it anymore. Couples that do not practice confession and absolution are destined for trouble!

I put this in the **context of marriage and family** because I think this is where we have most difficulty. How sad that those whom we love the most we also hurt the most. It is relatively easy to come to church and confess your sins before God and bask in the assurance of His forgiveness. But to go home, verbalize our faults, feel miserable about our sin, confess, our loud, to the person sinned against, and then forgive as we have been forgiven, in our families and extended families, this is a challenge. It is no accident that the verses immediately following our text reveal Peter asking Jesus, "*Lord, how many times do I have forgive my brother? Seven times? And Jesus responds, Seventy times seven.*" In other words, this is a way of life. It is in the intimacy of family that we understand the why this reminder is necessary. You don't have to think further than your own family to know why we make this part of our liturgy Sunday after Sunday.

In a few moments we taste the bread and sip the wine. We hear those lovely and precious words, "*given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sin.*" Absolved. What a gift! A gift to be received and shared. Amen.