

The Pastor's "Task"

John 20:21b-23

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

April 28, 2019 – Second Sunday of Easter



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. On the day Jesus rose from the dead the Apostles were gathered together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst to show them His hands and side so that they would know it was Him. After that was when He said them: “‘As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” When our Lord and Master spoke these words, He was commissioning His Apostles to carry on the gracious work He had given them to do – the same work that those who followed after them on Christ’s behalf would do – and this through the agency of the Church. Jesus was sharing with them how He would manifest His presence among His people after He returned to heaven – and how also, from that time forward, He would continue to bestow the benefits of His forgiveness upon sinners until the time of His Second and Final Coming.

In other words, our Lord was preparing His Apostles to carry on with the work of the Church, so that many years later you and I might also be able to find both Him and His forgiveness. And although the Apostles didn’t know it at the time, they were about to become the first of many men who would be called into the Office of the Holy Ministry to represent Christ, and to distribute His gifts to His people. It was a small beginning, to be sure, for on the night when Jesus spoke these words there were only ten present. Judas had already committed suicide, and hadn’t yet been replaced – and Thomas was also absent, presumably sulking in his own dark corner, refusing to believe the testimony of the others that they had seen the Lord, that the tomb was indeed empty, and that He had truly risen from the dead even as He said!

After forty more days – during which, again and again, Christ met with His Apostles to strengthen them for service in their new Office – our Lord then finally ascended bodily into heaven. And as His followers stood and watched Him vanish into the clouds, they heard the angel tell them how they were to return to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. It was on that day when the Apostles would be permanently installed into their new Office to begin and continue their Christ-

appointed work – in His stead and by His command – even as the Church and Her ministers have continued doing even until today.

Thus it was, through the Apostolic Ministry our Lord established that night, that Christ, even now, continues His saving work of bestowing forgiveness to sinners in His Church. That was Christ’s purpose for appearing to His followers on the first evening of His Resurrection – on that first Easter night as they hid behind closed, locked doors. Over the years, of course, there have been numerous theories as to why our Lord established His Church by instituting the Office of the Holy Ministry. Some are of the opinion that the Church was established to ensure that there might be more righteous behavior upon the earth – and indeed, wouldn’t our world be a better place if righteous behavior and good order flourished among all the people of this world? But if that was the reason for the existence of the Church, wouldn’t there likely be more peace on earth – and fewer tragedies such the attack on the World Trade Center, and all the other horrific events which have plagued mankind since the beginning?

Still, even though this wasn’t the reason for the establishing of the Church, many still seem to have adopted this misguided agenda as the primary ministry of the Church. They openly endorse political candidates, attempt to influence legislation, and lay out in great detail the proper kinds and types of social behavior their members – and all of society, for that matter – ought to follow. They carry out this work as though this agenda had been dropped out of heaven directly into their laps. However noble and good such practices might be, that was not the reason for Christ to establish Church as it’s recorded here in this text.

Some others have opined that Christ’s purpose for establishing His Church and the Office of the Holy Ministry was so bigger and bigger crowds might be drawn together to hear Christ’s message – to excite and motivate more and more people into “God-pleasing” behavior. And there are a goodly number of Churches today – including many in our own Synod – who have drawn up their marching orders and game plans according to this agenda. You’ve probably seen or heard the advertisements in the papers, on the radio, and on television. Maybe you’ve received one of these advertisement in your mailbox. But notice the focus in most of

this advertising. Are people invited to come and receive the promise of the forgiveness of sins? Is the allure the washing of regeneration and new birth in Holy Baptism? Is the enticement the gift of life and salvation given in the blessed Sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Are they promised an actual "audience" with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, even as God Himself has promised? Sadly, that's most often **not** the case. The appeal is most often singers, entertainers, plays, musicians, extravagant musicals, dancers, lots of excitement – and maybe even a laser light show!

But none of this is found in today's Gospel text as a reason for the Church's existence. None of this is found in Christ's institution, ordination, and installation of the Apostles into His Holy Ministry. And yet, although it might seem to be a very small thing, there is still something great and exceedingly glorious taking place at every gathering of Christ's people as they gather around His Word and Sacraments. It's Christ Himself! Christ is here, in person, with His gifts of life and salvation. The Holy Spirit is here, working to point people to Christ through the Gospel. God's promise is that His forgiveness – even for the most awful, offensive sin you've ever committed – will be here, **for you**! That, dear Christian, that is the **only** drawing card Christ ever placed in His Church! The reason for the Apostolic Office – which is the Office of the Keys and the primary task of the Pastor – is to forgive the sins of sinners, and send them home forgiven and fully at peace with God. But where unrepentance raises its ugly head, the role of the Apostolic Office and the primary task of the Pastor is to retain the sins of those who refuse to repent and to send the sinner home unforgiven and at odds with God – hopefully so that this might finally drive them to repentance. This is the one and only purpose for which our Lord established His Church and instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry – to forgive and retain sins!

According to our Lord's design, God's people are to come to the Divine Service in Christ's Church to gather around the Gospel and the Sacraments and to receive the gifts He earned for us all upon the tree of the cross. But as we know full well, those who aren't hungry aren't likely to patronize restaurants. Those whose cars have a full tank of gas have no need of a gas station. People who need no goods or services aren't going to go to the store to get them. And those who feel no guilt or shame for their sin are going to drive right past the Church. They want nothing to do with Church because they feel no need for God's forgiveness!

Finally it's also true that people aren't likely to frequent any place where goods are sold if they have no

money. And sadly, it's also true that some will still drive right past the Church even though their conscience is aching in the knowledge of their sins – because they think themselves unworthy, and have no hope of receiving God's forgiveness. That's a shame and a pity, for not only is real forgiveness for real sinners available here in Christ's Church, but here is where it's also distributed. And best of all, this forgiveness is absolutely free! It's free because it was paid for by the One who died to purchase that forgiveness for us all – by the One who rose from the dead to certify that forgiveness – and by the One who established, ordained and installed in His Church the means by which He is even now present among His people – and through which He bestows on you His full and free forgiveness, life and salvation by means of simple, ordinary words, and plain, common elements such as water, bread and wine.

That, dear Christian, that is the way God wants it to happen whenever people come into Christ's Church – whenever they gather around Christ's Word and His Sacraments. So, every time you come here to God's House Christ is present with His forgiveness so that it might be freely bestowed upon you through the Office of the Keys – through that same office He ordained on that first Easter night behind locked doors when only ten pastors – the first of many who would later be called into that office – were present to hear His words. According to God's express design, the pastors of His Church – until that time when our Lord comes again on the Last Day – will continue exercising that Holy Office on Christ's behalf and for your benefit – even as Christ first set this process in motion nearly two thousand years ago.

Here is where God reminds you that He loves you, that you are His own dear child, that Christ has died in your place, that the Holy Spirit now dwells within you and is keeping you in that one true Christian faith, that heaven is anxiously awaiting your arrival, and that Christ is now in your corner in the midst of every struggle, every defeat, and every challenge of life. **Here** is where Christ has promised to be. **Here** is where Christ deigns to give You His gifts. And because this is so, when the Divine Service is concluded this morning you can joyfully walk out of here and be about your business, because you know Christ is here to forgive you your sins and to grant you everlasting, eternal peace with God. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.