

John 7.53-8.11

“Be It Done to You as You Believe”

“As Surely as I Live, God Said” Midweek Lenten Series 2018

Wednesday after *Oculi*, 7 March 2018

St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

There is a prayer the we have all heard and know. It is the prayer of one in a moment of desperation and hopelessness, who finally turn to God in a last ditched effort to make it through. It is the prayer of Hollywood and it always begins the same way: “If you are there God...” This is the prayer of unbelief.

Christian prayers in faith are bold and confident. Christians don’t wonder if God is there, we call on Him and command Him to be active in our life. Even in the Lord’s Prayer we dare to call God Father and we further dare to make demands of Him. It is a call to God to be who He has promised to be to us in His own Word.

Of course, I’m not here today to talk to you about prayer, but instead I came to preach on confession and absolution, and also, the peculiar role of the pastor in delivering that absolution in the Office of the Keys. Yet the faith in which we receive absolution from the pastor is the same confident faith in which we pray.

We don’t hear it enough today, but in our hymnal the old form of confession and absolution has the pastor pose fundamental question: *Do you believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?* You’re supposed to say “yes” but we can be left wondering, just like in the prayers of Hollywood – Do I believe? Am I really forgiven?

“As Surely as I Live, God Said,” is our theme for this Lent taken from the hymn where we hear these words: *“The words which absolution give/Are His who died that I might live/The minister whom Christ has sent/Is but His humble instrument.”* And later, *“He who by grace the word believes the purchase of His blood receives.”*

This is the challenge of the Office of the Keys. That a pastor, a sinful man, would come and give the Sacred things of God. How do we know that it is real and true? How are we not left searching? But that is exactly why God gave us pastors in this Office. So that we don’t have to search.

This is the great gift of the office. If we want to find God’s forgiveness it isn’t floating in the ether, it is found in the simple words spoken by the pastor, “I forgive you.” So by faith we confidently know this forgiveness is *“just is valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.”*

So we boldly proclaim the promise placed on our pastors:

IN CHRIST ALONE WE ARE FORGIVEN BY FAITH ALONE.

I.

Which brings us to our reading from earlier in John. It’s an important text because it shows how God deals with the guilty. It is a perfect picture of Confession and Absolution.

Here we meet a woman caught in sin and has been dragged by the religious leaders into the temple and before Jesus. She is merely a pawn being used to try and trap and discredit Jesus. But even even though their motives are false, this woman’s sin is very real. She is an adulteress, an admitted sinner, and she deserves death.

And so it goes. We love mercy and understanding for our faults but have a hard time giving the same to others. We'll confess others' sins all day while ignoring our own dark and shameful acts. It drives us to shame those who have their sin exposed out of simple relief that it isn't us caught out.

But before God we're all caught and without excuse. Jesus writes something on the ground and we often wonder what it was, but we aren't told so it's probably best if we don't speculate. Anyway, it's what Jesus says that exposes the people and us: **"Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone."**

Exposed by Jesus words, the people don't ask for mercy or forgiveness. They don't apologize to the woman. They simply leave, and their plotting will continue until finally they get their hearts' desire – the death of Jesus. There was no repentance and Jesus does not forgive them. They are sealed in their sin.

II.

But the woman shows what it means to live repentant and forgiven. **"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? ...Neither do I condemn you: go and from now on sin no more."** Jesus knew her repentant heart and that still she received only condemnation. Until Jesus comes and forgives her.

Hearing Christ's removal of her condemnation, she was forgiven. Hearing the word of forgiveness proclaimed by your pastor, you are forgiven. We can wonder like the Pharisees did when Jesus forgave the paralytic, **"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"** But God has given and grounded that forgiveness in the pastor.

The temptation is to squish our eyes shut and cry out, "I do believe I am forgiven! I do believe I am forgiven!" Faith is never something we work up in ourselves. Faith only holds on to the truth revealed.

Was that woman forgiven? She was caught in sin and the penalty she deserved was death – that's the law of Moses. Was Jesus lying when He said she wasn't condemned? Was He ignoring God's Law? No, instead He was fulfilling it. Jesus understood the truth, "As surely as I live" God said, "I would not see the sinner dead."

Instead, God must die for sinners. Jesus must go to the cross be condemnation for that woman and die her death for her. Her forgiveness is not fantasy – it is the very truth of God that is hers in the cross of Christ. And so it is for us. The absolution is simply pointing you to the cross while also grounding the truth of the cross in the pastor's words, "I forgive you."

"Do you believe this?" It's a tricky question. I don't always feel forgiven or even worthy of forgiveness. But at the cross, Jesus spoke this truth, **"It is finished."** I don't feel finished, but God is no liar. I am forgiven, you are forgiven. That truth is based not on my feelings but a promise of God.

Let God be the God who He has promised to be – a God who forgives helpless, repentant sinners. Come and confess your sin and be it done to you as you believe – you are forgiven, now go and sin no more, always living in the sure truth of the forgiveness of the cross. Amen.

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