

The collect this morning begins, “O LORD, we beseech thee, absolve thy people from their offenses.’ This is what we wish to explore this morning. What does it mean to be absolved of sins? How does absolution function in the church? And finally we will briefly meditate upon what our Gospel lesson teaches us this morning about absolution.

Absolution is a freeing from blame or guilt, and also a release from consequences, obligations, or penalties. So when thinking of absolution, think of freeing or releasing; this also fits well with our collect today. We prayed that we would be absolved by God, that through His bountiful goodness we would be delivered from the bands of those sins that we have committed because of our frailty, our moral weakness, our unenthusiastic love of God.

Sin in our lives binds us and separates us from God. When we've sinned, we don't want to come to God in prayer; we are also apprehensive about coming to church for worship and fellowship. But that is exactly what we need to do in those times. Sin is the elevation of the self over and above God, to whom we owe our devotion and obedience. Sin therefore separates us from God and from each other. It isolates us and teaches us to look upon our fellow humans with contempt – they become objects that we use instead of image-bearers that we are to love. Sin becomes a prison for us. We convince ourselves that we are “taking care of our own needs,” but this is just modern therapeutic language for not loving God as we ought to and not loving our neighbors as ourselves. If you place your own needs above all else, do not be surprised to discover yourself to being alone and isolated in a self-made prison.

Hebrews 12:1 tells us, “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” We often cite this verse in relation to the great cloud of witnesses mentioned in it, but let us not skip over the reference to the sin which so easily besets us. The admonition here is that we would be in fellowship with that great company of the faithful, of the obedient, of the righteous, but our sins tie us up and keeps us from following in their train. Sin cuts us off. We need to be freed from its bondage. We need to be restored to God.

Of course it is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that this restoration takes place. 1 John 1:9 says, “If

we confess our sins, (Christ) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." And every Sunday we hear these verses after the absolution:

COME unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Hear also what Saint John saith. If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the Propitiation for our sins.

Jesus Christ came into this world to be one of us, to live the life of righteousness that we could not live for ourselves, to be the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world, the sacrifice for our sins, to pay the wages of sin which is death. He became sin, nailed to the cross, so that we might become the righteousness of God. Our sins die with Christ, and we receive this remission of sins in faith through baptism.

Though as maturing Christians our daily sins might be small, they no doubt still beset us. We will always sin on a daily basis, and therefore we need ongoing remission of sins. And thus Jesus remains our peace with God. This daily forgiveness we seek is not appropriated again through baptism, but through confession.

As reformed catholic believers, each of us is admonished to confess our sins frequently. There is no need to wait when you know that you have sinned – doing something you shouldn't have done or not doing what you should have done, maybe losing patience with your neighbor or spouse or neglecting to help someone that you could have helped. It is always important to pause where you are and pray for forgiveness. God is faithful and just and will absolutely forgive. And if you pray the daily offices, that confession is built into the service. We desire to always keep short accounts with God. We are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love. Jesus, we pray you would always gently bring us back with your

shepherd's staff into the fold of God.

Yet our public confessions, within the context of the daily offices, or the Eucharist, or the sacrament of penance, have an advantage over our private confessions in that they contain the declaration of absolution. We get to hear from the priest, acting as a representative of the bishop, acting as a representative of Our Lord Christ Himself, that not only our are sins forgiven, but that we are freed from the bands of those sins which by our frailty we have committed, those sins which beset us, entangle us, imprison us, and isolate us. Absolution is the public declaration that you have been freed, that you have been released.

Now even after hearing absolution, our hearts may still condemn us. We might not feel like we are freed. Yet with faith, let us deny these doubts for the grace of Christ to us is not dependent upon our feelings. Christ frees us from our sins. Move forward with every confidence that this is so, but especially when hearing absolution from your priest. Why? Because Jesus Christ especially gave His apostles and their successors the right and the duty to pronounce forgiveness and freedom of sins.

On the evening of His resurrection, Jesus Christ appeared to His disciples in the upper room as recorded for us in the Gospel according to St. John, chapter 20. In verse 21-23 we read,

Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.

And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost:

Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

So Christ here is sending his disciples into the world in order to bring His peace. He gifts them with the Holy Ghost so that they may authoritatively pronounce His forgiveness, and through the remission of sins, loose those who turn to Jesus from the imprisonment of sin. This authority was handed down by the apostles to their successors, the bishops of the Church, and to the priests duly ordained by these bishops. It was not given to the deacons of the church. This pattern continues even today through all branches of the catholic Church. Priests of the Church pronounce absolution, but not deacons. Absolution is the authoritative

verbal declaration that sins are forgiven and that the people of God, hearing this declaration in faith, indeed are cleansed and freed from their sins.

The gospel this morning reinforces these ideas. It is an interesting portion of scripture, for a larger story is interrupted by a smaller one. The larger story is about the death of a young girl. The inner story is about the daily symbolic death of a woman with a twelve year disease, a hemorrhage. One of the most ancient biblical symbols is that of blood. It represents the life of a creature, and especially of that life being poured out. In other words, the issuing forth of blood was a sign of death. This woman was considered unclean, impure, by the Mosaic law. She was a living sign of death, and she had borne this burden, on the fringes of Jewish society, for twelve years. She had a defect, symbolic of sin, though not necessarily caused by anything that she had done, that isolated her. After twelve years, she was desperate for healing, and Jesus Christ was her only hope.

As an impure person, living under condemnation and contempt, she dared not approach Jesus directly, but knew that in Him she had hope of a cure; she had hope of salvation, of being released from this daily death. "If I could just touch the hem of His garment, I shall be made whole." She was too ashamed to let anyone know of her plan. Her life was characterized by shame. But she had to try. And her plan worked! She waited until the crowd thronged around the Messiah and then she reached out and just barely touched the edge of His clothes, knowing immediately that she had indeed been made whole.

We should all see ourselves in this story. All of us carry the weight of shame for things that we have done or that we have neglected, and we are ashamed to come to Jesus for healing. We would rather just hide from Him. Yes we can make our private confessions to Him, but we don't want to really expose ourselves to Him if we can avoid it. It is too humbling. It is too vulnerable. We would rather just say a quick confession, a quick brush of the hem. But Jesus won't be used like that. He sees us entirely: the bad, the ugly, the putrid parts of our souls, not to condemn us, for as the children of God, we are no longer condemned, but to pour out His forgiveness, His grace, His love upon us—to heal every bit of us. We cannot receive such healing for illnesses which we refuse to acknowledge. Jesus says to the woman, and to us today as well, "Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole."

We too must keep short accounts of our sins, our daily little deaths. In faith we too must reach out, and, without attempting to hide our failings, we must daily touch the hem of our Savior's garments, receiving the absolution that He unfailingly gives. We daily tug on His sleeve, "Jesus, in your boundless love, I need your forgiveness and health once again. Forgive me through your mercy, and restore me through your love." But these daily sins are symbolic of the larger death that we are subject too; the ultimate death of body and soul. It is not our action that saves us, for the dead cannot act. It is all of the action of Jesus, who in our gospel story reached out and took the little girl by the hand, and the young maiden who was dead was made alive and well.

All of us who have in faith been baptized into the Church have been taken by the hand of our Lord Jesus and raised from death to new life. All of us need daily assurances of the continued forgiveness which we have in Christ. We need to hear those words spoken to us by Christ through our bishop, and through our priests, "The Almighty and Merciful Lord grant you Absolution and Remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit."

Yes Lord, this is what we want. Although we reach out to you with trepidation in shame, mercifully look at us, see every area that needs your healing. Speak to us in love for we again need to hear your words, "Be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole." We need again to be freed from the bands of our sins, to truly amend our lives so that they would be in greater conformity to your righteousness and holiness, by your abundant grace to experience the eternal life given us through your incarnation, death, and resurrection, and to become more fully indwelt by Your Holy Spirit. Grant this we pray,

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.