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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/20/2011, Midweek Lent: Private Confession
John 13:21-32

PRAYER OF THE DAY

☐ Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

[Note from Pastor Fryer: We have two Gospel Readings this evening. The first one is "The Office of the Keys." That is the extraordinary authority granted by Jesus to St. Peter and so to the Church to forgive or to retain sins here on earth. The second reading is about Judas. It is the traditional reading for today, Holy Wednesday.]

HOLY GOSPEL..... Matthew 16:13-19, RSV

³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

HOLY GOSPEL..... John 13:21-32, RSV

²¹When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; ²⁴so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." ²⁵So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast"; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night. ³¹When

he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; ³²if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

Hymn LBW 305 *I Lay My Sins on Jesus*

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the year 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, the church adopted a rule requiring Christians to go to Confession at least once a year. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* summarizes the rule this way:

Canon 21, the famous “Omnis utriusque sexus,” which commands every Christian who has reached the years of discretion to confess all his, or her, sins at least once a year to his, or her, own (i.e. parish) priest.¹

I bet there were good pastoral motives for such a rule. For example, I’ve read that some people were putting off their Confession to their deathbed, hoping to maximize the chance that they could enter into heaven without lots of sin on their record. Well, if that is what people were doing, you could understand the priests and bishops being worried about this and trying to counteract it by requiring Christians to go to Confession more often -- at least once a year.

But a lot of time had passed between this Canon 21 and the time of Martin Luther -- about three centuries. And during that time, the rule requiring Confession had become a kind of spiritual misery for people. The chief problem seems to have been the requirement to confess *all* sins. When the focus is on the confession of *all* sins, the conscience is left uneasy as to whether something was forgotten. Luther described the misery this way:

Where the confession was not made perfectly and in complete detail, we were told that the absolution was not valid and the sin was not forgiven. Thereby the people were driven to the point that everyone despaired of confessing *that* purely (which was, of course, impossible), and no conscience could feel at peace or have confidence in the absolution. (Luther’s *Large Catechism*²)

¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09018a.htm>

² Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2000, S. 456

So, in the Lutheran churches, Luther abolished the old rule compelling people to go to Confession at least once a year. Luther believed that if Christians properly understood Confession and Forgiveness, so that they thought of it as a comfort to the afflicted conscience, there would be no need for a rule requiring Confession:

If all this were clearly laid out, and along with that if the needs that ought to move and induce us to confession were clearly indicated, there would be no need of coercion or force. Their own consciences would persuade Christians and make them so anxious that they would rejoice and act like poor, miserable beggars who hear that a rich gift of money or clothes is being given out at a certain place; they would hardly need a bailiff to drive and beat them but would run there as fast as they could so as not to miss the gift. Suppose, now, that the invitation were changed into a command that all beggars should run to the place, with no reason being given and no mention made of what they were to seek or receive there. How else would beggars go but with resentment, not expecting to receive anything but just letting everyone see how poor and miserable they are? Not much joy or comfort would come from this, but only a greater hostility to the command.

Indeed, Luther believed that if Confession and Absolution were taught aright, then people would compel the pastor to offer it to them:

Thus we teach what a wonderful, precious, and comforting thing confession is, and we urge that such a precious blessing should not be despised, especially when we consider our great need. If you are a Christian, you need neither my compulsion nor the pope command at any point, but you will force yourself to go and ask me that you may share in it... If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession, not under compulsion but rather coming and compelling us to offer it.

There are other kinds of confession and absolution besides the private confession before the pastor:

To begin with, I have said that, in addition to the confession that we are discussing here, there are two other kinds, which have an even greater right to be called the common confession of Christians. I refer to the practice of confessing to God alone or to our neighbor alone, asking for forgiveness.

These two kinds are included in the Lord's Prayer when we say, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," etc.

So, Luther praised personal confession before God and before the neighbor. But also, Luther urged his followers to avail themselves of Confession and Absolution before their pastor. He was optimistic about the practice. He took it for granted that Christians would want to go to Confession and receive the consolations of the Gospel from their pastor.

However, if Christians would not do that, then there is trouble. Luther refused to reinstate the rule requiring people to go to Confession. But he did exhort people to go to Confession, and he wondered about them if they refused to go:

Rather we give this advice: If you are poor and miserable, then go and make use of the healing medicine. Those who feel their misery and need will no doubt develop such a desire for confession that they will run to it with joy. But those who ignore it and do not come of their own accord, we let go their way. However, they ought to know that *we do not regard them as Christians.*

A long time has passed since Luther. During much of that time, Private Confession quite fell out of practice in the Lutheran Church. But in our generation, it has been restored. And judging by our Lutheran confessional teaching, it should have been restored.

So, let us take a look at the order of Individual Confession and Forgiveness in the Lutheran Book of Worship. (*Here follows a walk through of the liturgy.*)

INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

(*Lutheran Book of Worship, pages 196-197*)

The confession made by a penitent is protected from disclosure. The pastor is obligated to respect at all times the confidential nature of a confession.

The pastor greets the penitent. When the penitent has knelt, the pastor begins:

P Are you prepared to make your confession?

R I am.

The pastor and penitent say the psalm together.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall declare your praise.
Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice,
but you take no delight in burnt offerings.
The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness,
and cleanse me from my sin. (Ps. 51:16-18, 1-2)

- ☐ You have come to make confession before God.
In Christ you are free to confess before me, a pastor in his Church,
the sins of which you are aware and the sins which trouble you.
- ☒ I confess before God that I am guilty of many sins.
Especially I confess before you that...

The penitent confesses those sins which are known and those which disturb or grieve him/her.

For all this I am sorry and I pray for forgiveness. I want to do better.

The pastor may then engage the penitent in pastoral conversation, offering admonition and comfort from the Holy Scriptures. Then they say together:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with your free Spirit. (Ps. 51:1, 11-13)

The pastor stands and faces the penitent or remains seated and turns toward the penitent.

- ☐ Do you believe that the word of forgiveness I speak to you comes from God himself?
- ☒ Yes, I believe.

The pastor lays both hands on the head of the penitent.

☐ God is merciful and blesses you. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

☒ Amen

The penitent may pray silently in thanksgiving, or may pray together with the pastor:

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
He will not always accuse us,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our sins from us.
As a father cares for his children,
so does the Lord care for those who fear him. (Ps. 103:8-13)
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen

☐ Blessed are those whose sins have been forgiven, whose evil deeds have been forgotten.
Rejoice in the Lord, and go in peace.

The penitent stands and may exchange the peace with the pastor.

So, Individual Confession and Forgiveness is available in the Lutheran Church. Now we come to this evening's Bible story -- the story of Judas. Let us consider two questions about Judas: First, does he need to confess?³ And second, can even Judas be forgiven?

³ This part of the sermon - the part on Judas's freedom to *not* betray our Lord - is based on a sermon of mine from a good while ago: Holy Wednesday, March 26, 1997.

The first question might seem strange to you: Does Judas need to confess his betrayal of our Lord? Of course he does! you might want to declare. But I raise the question for the sake of human freedom. Was Judas free *not* to betray our Lord?

It seems to me that much of the story and mystery of Judas can be summarized in three verses of scripture. Here they are:

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" (John 12:4-5)

The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." (Matt 26:24 RSV)

This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. (John 12:6)

The first two of these verses suggest *fate* and *predestination* to sin. The third verse speaks of nothing so mysterious as *fate*, but rather of old-fashioned greed for money.

Let's begin with that parenthesis about Judas -- the one that says "he who was to betray him." As a matter of grammar, let us note that this clause does not necessarily speak of fate. It may simply be pointing to the one who later in the story did in fact betray our Lord, but who was also free *not* to do so. That is, the words "he who was to betray" do not imply necessity of betrayal, but simply identify the one who did betray.

It would be same in anybody's story -- not just the story of Judas. Thus, we could refer to young Abraham Lincoln in a log-throwing context, and go ahead and specify the lad we mean by saying, "Yes, the one who was to become President someday." It does not mean inescapable destiny for such roles.

And so it is with Judas. When the New Testament refers to Judas as the one "who was to betray Jesus," it need not mean that Judas *had* to betray our Lord, but simply that the Betrayer is the one the text has in mind -- and not, say, Judas, the son of James. (Rf. Luke 6:16)

And yet we might wonder, "If Christ predicted his passion, as surely he did... and if he predicted that he would suffer and die, then it must be by the hands of *someone*, and it certainly looks as if that someone was bound to be Judas, else the work of human salvation would be impeded."

Not so! Here I stand up for the freedom God grants us to be good. Let me use the marvelous line of St. John Chrysostom about that:

For if Judas had repented and turned away from the sin he contemplated, then our God, who is wise and endlessly rich in contrivance, could have found another way for our salvationⁱ

Our Lord's fair skill is fully able to take the wickedness of Judas and bring forth beautiful salvation from it, yet that by no means excuses Judas or forces his hand.

Finally, the second question, Given that Judas should have confessed his sin, could he have been granted absolution? The answer to that is Yes. I feel compelled to such an answer because I must not shortchange God's arm. I must not decide in advance that some sins are so awful that the Lord cannot forgive them, for the Lord is rich in forgiveness. We can use the words of Psalm 130 to make the point:

Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. (Psalm 130:7, KJV)

Judas despaired. He seems to have doubted the capacity of God to forgive him, and in that he paid the Lord an injustice.

Do not fear, then, about yourself that you have somehow sinned so badly that you are lost. Never fear such a thing. The great thing about private confession is that the Lord is willing to entrust his word of forgiveness to simple earthen vessels like clergy because there is something he wants you to hear in plain spoken words coming to you from outside yourself: He wants you to know that he forgives the sins of the penitent, for the sake of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

ⁱ Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Volume 10, pages 486-87.