

## **“Do you want this gift?” John 20:19-31**

**“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending 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 withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”**

Today we read how risen Lord Jesus Christ appeared to His disciples and sent them to forgive the sins of all who repent and believe. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to reflect of a precious gift of our Lord Jesus Christ, which has been somehow neglected in our church.

I am talking about confession and Absolution. Yes, about confession and Absolution, and not only this one which we have as a part of our Divine Service, but also about confession and Absolution, which is done privately.

So, private confession and Absolution. And I can already hear what some of you are thinking. Isn't that Roman Catholic thing? I only say it because I have heard these questions in many of our conversations.

Have you ever been to private confession and have you ever received private Absolution? So many will answer with ‘no, I haven’t’. The sad fact is that we are missing out on one of the greatest gifts that Jesus has left to His Church.

Today we’ll try to understand what confession and Absolution is. What kind of confessions and Absolutions there are, what is this private confession and Absolution, and who can receive this wonderful gift our Lord?

What is this confession and Absolution? You know that in the beginning Adam and Eve enjoyed God's presence, they spoke with Him face to face. But then their relationships were broken by sin, by the rebellion of our first parents.

We know how it happens in our relationships. Children are to honor their parents and to obey them. If they disobey their parents, they break their relationships, and they remain broken until they are restored again by means of repentance and forgiveness.

This is what Jesus came to do. He came to restore what was broken by sin. To restore relationships between humanity and their Creator and to restore the brokenness of God's good creation which happened and the consequence of our sin.

First, Jesus showed that He takes upon Himself full responsibility for what the sinful humanity have done, He takes their sins and guilt upon Himself and destroys them in His death. Then He rose from the dead, and now He offers His forgiveness to everyone.

If we try to illustrate it with money analogy, then our sins are as our debts. They are so great that there is no way that we could ever repay them. Jesus took over all our debts, the debt of the whole humanity and paid it.

Now we are in debt to Him. Except it is not about such small thing as money, we are talking about life. Life. Now Jesus can choose to require our debts from us, or to forgive them, and He chooses to forgive them.

This is why He said after His resurrection that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). This is why He said to His disciples:

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Usually people are quite clever and when they hear in the Divine Service these words "I forgive you all your sins", they doubt 'how can a pastor forgive me my sins, for only God can do it'. It is clever and an observation, indeed.

No human being can forgive other's sins on their own. How could we? As we can't make bread and wine into Jesus' body and blood, so we can't forgive anyone's sins on our own. And we don't do it on our own.

We do it 'on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by His command'. Exactly as we just read it. "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you [Christ is sending us]. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." This is what we mean by Jesus' command.

How else can we illustrate what the confession and Absolution is? Imagine that you are a parent and your child returns home, and you have already been informed about their mischievous behavior. You know everything.

What would you expect when your child returns home? We would expect to hear their repentance: “I am sorry, I have done wrong, please, forgive me!” What happens if we don’t hear these words?

There is brokenness in our relationships. We as parents will know that our child is not honest and open with us. May be even not repentant. And this child will feel this guilt, knowing that they have sinned against us.

What happens if they come home and repent and ask for forgiveness? What do you do? And it is not a case only between parents and children, but between adults as well. We embrace them with tears of joy and we forgive them.

We hug them and kiss them, and our emotions overflow, for something very precious that was broken is now restored. And the greater the sin and offence, the greater is this joy of repentance and forgiveness.

I imagine that almost everyone would have experienced something like this. This is what confession and Absolution is all about. About restoration of our relationships, in our case, with our God and Father and our Savior Jesus Christ.

When we come before God with our confession, we are as His disobedient children, who have sinned against Him. We know it, and He knows it even better. He knows our hearts, our thoughts, our words, our action. He knows everything about us. And we know that He knows.

Now what happens if we come before Him and pretend that we haven’t done anything wrong? Our brokenness in relationships remains. Imagine if you are guilty before someone and haven’t received their forgiveness.

Whatever they say, you will hear through your guilty conscience. Whatever they say, even if it is something good, you will hear with suspicion. Your perception will be poisoned by your guilt.

The same is true in our relationships with our God. If we haven’t been honest with Him, if we hide our sins and don’t want to repent from them and to turn away from them, if we do not repent and receive His forgiveness, we will listen to whatever He speaks to us in the Divine Service, or in His Word, with suspicion.

This is why we have the confession and Absolution at the beginning of our service. It has been the Church’s practice since ancient times. Repentance and forgiveness comes first, then we listen as our God speaks to us and join in in His Holy Meal.

Remember this, every time when you confess your sins to your God, have this picture in your mind, that you as disobedient, yet beloved child of our Father, come to Him, to repent, to confess your sins, and to be embraced by Him and to hear His forgiveness. “I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Now, if this is what the confession and Absolution is about then why would we have to do the private confession and Absolution? No one has to do it, but we all are welcomed to receive it and its blessings if we desire or have a need.

What do I mean by this? We can say that there are three main reasons to receive private confession and Absolution. Sin, unbelief and desire for joy and peace. What does this mean?

First about sin. Luther compared devil with a snake. He said that the devil has snake's head. If he finds a hole in our hearts, he will sneak in and we can't get him out unless we first get his head out.

It refers to our secret, our beloved sins. These may be sexual sins, pornography, these may be sins of tongue, or sins of heart, this may be violence in family or marriage, or addictions, but the point is, we don't want to talk about those our sins which really keep us under their spell. We better pretend that they are not here.

To break the spell of our sin, we need to put them in light. This is how we get devil's head out, then we can grab him and pull him out of our hearts. This is what private confession and Absolution is for.

You bring your beloved, your pet sin in light. You reveal it, you confess it before God and repent of it, and then you receive the forgiveness and encouragement from you God and Savior.

This is how we fight our sin with the help of private confession and Absolution. As you can see, it is not about us doing, it is God's gift to help us to resist Satan and to free us from the bondage of sin.

Next one was about unbelief. What do I mean by unbelief? You may be in the service and take part in our public confession and hear the words of the public Absolution. But then your guilt wouldn't leave you alone.

You can't believe that you are forgiven. Then private confession and Absolution is for you. For in this private confession it is you, who confess your particular sin. And it is you who receive the forgiveness.

When a pastor lays his hands on your head and says: “On behalf of my Lord Jesus Christ and by His command, I forgive you all your sins,” then you are assured that this is Jesus forgiving your sins, and that they are forgiven. You are forgiven!

The last one was about joy and peace. Remember, we talked about what a rich bouquet of emotions one experiences when broken relationships are restored. This is what private confession and Absolution is about.

It is about you repenting before your God and Savior, it is you confessing that you have sinned and are so sorry, it is you receiving Jesus forgiveness and joy and peace that comes together with it. That is, indeed, a wonderful gift on our God.

This is a precious gift that Jesus has left to His beloved children, but unfortunately only a few know of its blessings and receive it as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

But once you have received this life giving forgiveness, you hear the proclamation of God's word with different ears, as loving Savior speaking to you, and you can receive the Holy Communion with touched and changed heart.

All God's gifts are open to you, and God's grace is made much sweeter. For you have experience that you were guilty and now you are forgiven.

The Triune God bestows upon you His forgiveness in the Divine Service. He has sent you pastors who can deliver you His forgiveness in as personal way as possible. And He also has given the third option.

You can do the same. If you are baptized member of the Church, if you have been made an member of Jesus family, you have this unbelievable authority to forgive the sins of others on behalf of you Lord Jesus Christ.

If someone whom you know struggles with their guilt, with their past, with their sins, you can ask: "Do you repent of your sins? Do you admit before God that you have sinned?"

Do you want to receive forgiveness of all your sins from the Holy God Himself?" And if the say 'yes', then you can forgive them their sins. "On behalf of my Lord and by His command, I forgive you all your sins. Amen." And they are forgiven.

Concluding just two more things. I want you to focus on what John wrote. The apostles were hiding behind locked doors. Out of fear. We all are in a way hiding our inner self behind the locked doors. Out of fear.

These may be different fear. Fear to be rejected. Fear to be ridiculed. Fear of not being accepted. Fear of appearing dirty. Fear being hurt, in one way or another. We all carry with us wounds and injuries we have received from this broken world.

Jesus stood among the disciples despite of the fact that doors were locked. The same way He comes into your heart, whatever fears you may have. He comes to you, miraculously, uninvited, but so needed, and says to you: "Peace be with you!"

You know that in the Old Testament and to great extent in the New as well, peace didn't mean absence of war. It meant total well-being, state of forgiveness and restored relationships, Paradise like state, life for which we all are created. Life of joy and full of abundant presence of our loving God.

This is what Jesus says to you. Peace be with you! This is what He desires to bring to you. This is what His presence gives to you. And then as John wrote, He "breathed on them" and said "receive the Holy Spirit". This is so significant.

There is one more situation described in the Bible where the Son of God breathed on someone the Holy Spirit. In Gen 2 we read about the creation of Adam. When God had formed Him of the dust from the ground, He breathed into Him the Spirit of life and Adam became a living being.

When Jesus speaks to you His forgiveness, be it in the Divine Service or in private Absolution, this is exactly what happens. He Himself breathes into you the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life and make you alive.

Luther wrote in the Small Catechism. Where there is the forgiveness of sins there is the salvation and eternal life. When you hear again the words of forgiveness, remember, it is Jesus Christ Himself, speaking to you, breathing into you His life giving Spirit and giving you eternal life.

Brother and sister, rejoice and be glad, for you have heard the words of forgiveness and you have received the Spirit of life. Rejoice and be glad!

Amen.