

# THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

John 20:19-31

Fifth Wednesday in Lent

April 2, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 20, verses 19 through 23. This takes place on the day of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 20, beginning at verse 19, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>19</sup> 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.”** <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”**

*Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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Tonight we consider the forgiveness of sins. And we especially consider it in regards to the Holy Spirit.

When we think of the forgiveness of our sins, which member of the Trinity do we most often think of? Probably the Son, Jesus Christ, who was crucified for the forgiveness of our sins. Or perhaps we think of the Father, who gave his only Son and accepted his sacrifice as the all-sufficient atonement for sins. But what about the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit have to do with the forgiveness of sins? It might seem a little out of place that the Apostles' Creed mentions the forgiveness of sins here, in the Third Article, concerning the Holy Spirit, instead of in the Second Article concerning the Son, Jesus Christ. It's because the work of the Holy Spirit is to deliver that forgiveness to you. What if Jesus had died for the sins of the world and rose again from the dead, but none of us knew about it? What if the apostles had never been sent out to preach? What if they kept it as their own big secret? Or what if they did preach it, but no one believed? The faith would have died with them. We would never hear about it, never know about it, so we would still be in our sins. The work of the Holy Spirit is to deliver that word of forgiveness to you. As Luther teaches us to confess in the catechism, **“In this Christian Church, [the Holy Spirit] daily forgives abundantly all my sins and the sins of all believers.”**

I think back a few weeks to when we started this series. We read from John 16, where Jesus says concerning the Holy Spirit, **“He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you”** (John 16:14). By his death and resurrection, Jesus accomplished eternal salvation for you. In his crucifixion, Jesus took all the sins of the world upon himself, and he paid for them. In exchange, he gives to you his perfect righteousness. And it is the work of the Holy Spirit to deliver that righteousness to you. He's like the delivery man of the Holy Trinity. It's kind of similar to a child's birthday, and your grandmother orders a gift for you. What if the delivery guy

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never delivers it? Not only do you not receive it, but you might not even know about it. The Holy Spirit is kind of like the delivery guy of the Holy Trinity. He delivers Jesus' righteousness to you. He delivers the forgiveness of sins to you. He delivers eternal salvation to you.

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Consider the Old Testament lesson from Joel 2. This might be a familiar text. Peter quotes it on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, which we read every year on Pentecost. Paul also quotes one verse from it in Romans 10.

Joel prophesies of a day when the LORD would pour out his Holy Spirit on all flesh (2:28). He says that sons and daughters would prophesy, as well as old men and young men, even the servants (2:28-29). Then he goes on about wonders in the heavens and on the earth (2:30), the most concerning of which is the sun being darkened (2:31).

On the Day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, Peter announced the fulfillment of this prophecy, at least the part about the Spirit being poured out and lots of people prophesying. On the Day of Pentecost, all the Christians in Jerusalem, about 120 of them, were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other tongues. That is, they spoke in foreign languages that they, apparently, did not previously know. They declared the mighty works of God in all these languages. Many Jews who had travelled to Jerusalem from foreign places heard these Christians preaching in their own native languages. Even though all these people spoke Aramaic, the common language in Israel, the Holy Spirit wanted to speak the Gospel in their own languages, in order to demonstrate that salvation was for the entire world, not merely the Jews. So this got everyone's attention. Peter stood up, recited this passage from Joel, and preached to them about Jesus being crucified and raised from the dead. The result was that three thousand souls believed in Jesus, were baptized, and the Holy Spirit added them to the Church that day.

The great promise from this passage in Joel is that "it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (2:32). The signs in the heavens and on the earth are the destruction of this world when Jesus appears again on the Last Day. This world will pass away on that day. But everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved. The name of that LORD is Jesus, and the purpose of the Holy Spirit being poured out is so that we would call upon Jesus' name and be saved. So we see here in Joel that the Holy Spirit is the delivery guy of salvation. In Romans 10, where Paul quotes this passage, he goes on to make the obvious point that we cannot call upon Jesus' name if we have not heard it. So this is the primary purpose for which the Holy Spirit has been sent: that we would know the name of Jesus and call upon him in faith, so that we would receive the forgiveness of sins, everlasting life, and eternal salvation.

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The Gospel lesson might also be a familiar text. We hear it every year on the Second Sunday of Easter, so we're only three and a half weeks away from hearing it again. But tonight I want to focus on what it teaches regarding the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins. This occurs on that first Easter Sunday, in the evening after Jesus' resurrection. It's the first time that Jesus appears to the whole group of his disciples. And it's not just the apostles, but Luke records the same event, and he mentions many others from the larger group of disciples being there (Luke 24:33). Jesus declared peace to them (20:19). Then he showed them his hands and his side. His hands are where he was nailed to the cross, and his side is where he was pierced with a spear. These wounds are the marks that Jesus used to identify himself. Even though the disciples knew him and recognized his face, they couldn't believe it was really him, because they had seen him crucified just a few days earlier. The wounds identify Jesus. They also remind us of what Jesus

did to make peace between God and man, so that he can appear to his disciples and declare peace.

A couple weeks ago, if you were here, you heard a beautiful song about these wounds and recognizing Jesus in heaven by these wounds. We don't know what Jesus looks like. But when we get to heaven, if we don't recognize him by any other way, he'll be the guy with holes in his hands. And even if we do recognize him by some other way, I still want to see those wounds, not because we will need more evidence, but simply to behold that sign of what Jesus has done for us.

Then Jesus declares peace to them again, and he gives them the Holy Spirit. And the way he does this is so interesting. He breathes on them and says, **"Receive the Holy Spirit"** (20:22). I mentioned a couple weeks ago that in both Hebrew and Greek, the word for "spirit" can also mean "breath" or "wind" (Hebrew: רוּחַ; Greek: πνεῦμα). So there's a little play on words here. Jesus *breathes* on them as he gives them the Holy Spirit. And it's more than just a play on words, but this breath of Jesus is the physical way that he gives the Holy Spirit to them. It's like, or maybe I should say that it *is*, that Jesus breathes out and the Holy Spirit comes out of Jesus' mouth and enters into each of his disciples. All of these disciples had been baptized already before Jesus' death and resurrection, so this is the physical manner in which they receive the Holy Spirit. We received the Holy Spirit in Baptism. That's what Peter declares in his Pentecost sermon from Acts 2 (2:38). But these disciples received him through the breath of Jesus.

And then it's critical to recognize the purpose for which Jesus gave them, and gives us, the Holy Spirit. Don't just think, *Oh good, the Holy Spirit, what would I like him to do for me?* Jesus goes on, and this is not an unrelated thought, this is the purpose for which he gave them the Holy Spirit: **"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld"** (20:23).

Let's start with the last part of that first, only because it might confuse us. Why would Jesus, or anyone else, want to withhold forgiveness? It's not that this is the will of God. And it's not like Jesus gives us this power to spite and smite people we don't like. But it is to warn people who do not repent. It's like what Jesus said in the gospel lesson two Sunday's ago: **"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish"** (Luke 13:3, 5).

But the good and gracious will of God is to forgive sins. And so Jesus gives this authority to his disciples. And it's important to recognize that it's not just the apostles to whom Jesus gives this authority, but this was to the larger group of disciples. So this authority is given to the entire Church. Pastors today can and should forgive your sins. You, also, can and should forgive one another's sins. And Jesus is not speaking here about our forgiveness for the way a brother may have harmed us; he's talking about God's forgiveness. You have authority from Jesus to forgive sins. Parents, especially, should forgive the sins of their children. In our house it's part of our daily bedtime routine. When we tuck our children into bed, we make the sign of the cross on their foreheads and say, "Jesus forgives you." And it didn't take very long for each of them to start doing it back to us. They reach up from their beds, make the sign of the cross on my forehead, and give me absolution. I guess it just seemed natural to them. Or when you're talking to a friend, and they mention something they feel guilty about, you have authority to declare God's forgiveness to them. Even if they are not a Christian, or if you're not sure, you have authority to forgive their sins. Suppose a coworker or your neighbor got arrested or committed some sin that everyone knows about. It is entirely appropriate to walk over to them and say, "Jesus forgives you." What's the worst that can happen? They might not believe you. Or they might think you're weird. Or, and this is the hope, they might believe you and be saved.

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For me, this was a stumbling block when I began to study Lutheran theology in depth. I grew up Lutheran, but when I started to read more, including the catechism, I resisted this doctrine of absolution. In America, at least, Christians sometimes have an odd reluctance about forgiving sins. We might fear that someone would derive a false sense of security from the absolution. What are we really afraid of? Are we afraid that we might tell a sinner their sins are forgiven, and they might believe us? That's not something to fear, that's the goal. That's what we want to happen. The problem might be that we don't disciple them. It might be that we don't welcome them into the Church. It might be that we don't teach them to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. But the problem is not that we forgave their sins, nor is it that they believe it.

This is the way Jesus forgave sins. When a paralyzed man was brought to him, the man didn't seek forgiveness; everyone just wanted Jesus to heal him. But before he healed him, Jesus declared, "**Man, your sins are forgiven you**" (Luke 5:20). The absolution just comes out of the blue. Or when a woman was caught in adultery and brought to Jesus, she had not amended her ways, but Jesus forgave her. He said, "**Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more**" (John 8:11). He commanded her not to sin, but first he forgave her.

I suppose the thing that trips us up is that, because of our sinful natures, and because of our persistent doubts, we sometimes think of God as a reluctant forgiver. We can feel bashful about confessing our sins again, because we know that we don't deserve forgiveness. And we might feel that God is disappointed in us to have to forgive our sins again, so we picture him reluctantly forgiving sins, like he really doesn't want to have to keep forgiving people. So we might think, *only God can forgive sins, and if he's reluctant about it, then I really can't say if someone's sins are forgiven or not. How can I know if they really feel sorry enough to move God's heart?* But that is to completely misunderstand the good and gracious will of God. Christ has already suffered to pay for every sin. It does not cost God any more to forgive another sinner. He wants to forgive sins. And it may be true that only God can forgive sins, but Jesus shared this authority with his Church. It's like when someone has a bunch of something. Suppose someone has a million tacos, and they just want to give them away to as many people as possible, so they enlist the help of their friends. *Just give a taco to everyone you see.* That's how God is with forgiveness. He's not reluctant at all. He's not saving it only for the people who really know they need it. Those are the people who are most likely to appreciate it. They're more likely to be changed by it. But God's desire with forgiveness is to forgive all people. Therefore, Jesus gave this authority to his entire Church. And he wants us to use it. And this is the purpose for which Jesus gave his Holy Spirit: so that mouths would be opened to speak forgiveness, and hearts would be opened to believe it.

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And we see this in the other reading, from Acts 4. This occurs shortly after Pentecost. We don't know exactly how much time has passed, but it's the very next event in the book, so it seems like not much time. In chapter three, Peter and John were going to the temple when Peter healed a crippled man who was laying at the gate. The man didn't ask for it; he was expecting some money. But Peter healed him instead (3:1-10). This caught everyone's attention, and Peter preached to them about Jesus. The very next day, the rulers, elders, and scribes examined Peter and John concerning this matter. And Peter, "filled with the Holy Spirit," it says (4:8), preached to these rulers about Jesus. He concludes by saying, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12). The purpose of the Holy Spirit was to open the mouths of the apostles to proclaim forgiveness in Jesus' name, and for hearts to be opened to receive it.

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We see this theme all throughout the book of Acts. Acts can be a difficult book to understand. It's history, so it's not difficult to understand in that regard. It simply means what it says. This is the stuff that happened. But it's more difficult to interpret doctrine from history. About a third of the content of Acts is sermons and speeches from the apostles. So that's a good source of doctrine. We simply sit and listen to their teaching.

It's the events that are more difficult to interpret. There are healings and miracles, especially in the early days of the Church in Jerusalem (5:12-16). So some of our charismatic friends think this is the purpose of the Holy Spirit: to give us power to heal. So they pray for healing, and they might even teach that if you believe enough, the Holy Spirit will heal you. But many of the people who are healed in the book of Acts, perhaps even most of them, weren't even Christians yet. They were not healed because of their faith. They were healed to prove that Jesus is the Christ, so that they would call upon him for the forgiveness of sins. And the apostle Paul had something—he calls it a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-10). And he prayed three times for God to take it away from him, but he didn't, so Paul lived with it. But what was sufficient for Paul? The grace of God, the forgiveness of his sins.

Or there are three instances of speaking in tongues in the book of Acts (2:6; 10:46; 19:6). All three instances are different, and it's never the same people speaking tongues. But the common thread through all three of them is that God is accepting the Gentiles, that is, people of all nations, he is forgiving their sins, and he is pouring out his Holy Spirit upon them.

So we might read the book of Acts and long for the signs and wonders they experienced. And if the Holy Spirit wants to give us those things, he can, and I think we would be more than happy about it. But that's not the point of the book, and it's not the purpose of the Holy Spirit. The thing we consistently see with all the signs and wonders in the book of Acts, is that they draw the people in the book to Jesus, so that they will call upon his name for forgiveness. All of the signs and wonders confirm the preaching of the apostles. And when we listen to their sermons, they're not preaching about the healings. They always preach about Jesus, crucified and risen, for the forgiveness of sins. That's what every sermon in the book of Acts is about. So this is the purpose of the Holy Spirit: to open mouths to proclaim Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins, and to open hearts, to believe that good news and call upon Jesus for salvation.

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So what does all this mean for you? Why should we know this about the Holy Spirit? If it's not already obvious, it means that we should confess our sins. We should call upon the name of Jesus for forgiveness. For this is the work of the Holy Spirit: to call us to repentance. So listen to his calling. Obey his voice. Confess your sins. And receive forgiveness for Jesus' sake.

Forgiveness is not just a one-time thing, where you confess your sins once, and then you go on with your life. But we should confess our sins every day. Not that forgiveness wears off. It's not like God forgives our sins up to the time of our confession, and then we start accumulating more. No. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for all sins, even the ones we haven't committed yet. But I simply mean that this is the right way for us to live as Christians. We should constantly remember forgiveness, because we sin daily. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to seek forgiveness whenever we pray. This grace is what our faith lives on. And it is the Holy Spirit's work to continually deliver this forgiveness to us. So we should be assured that when we confess our sins, “God is faithful and just to forgive our sins” (1 John 1:9). It is his great pleasure to forgive you. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for your sin. And he wants you to live in that forgiveness forever. This is why he has given us his Holy Spirit. Amen.

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*Lord God, heavenly Father. Sin is our nature, and we have acted upon that nature in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We do not deserve your forgiveness. And yet, you invite us to seek it, and you promise to forgive us. So we boldly ask that you would be merciful and forgive all of our sins for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, who was crucified, raised, and lives forever with you and the Holy Spirit. As you have given your Holy Spirit to us, may he remain upon us to draw us to daily repentance, to trust in your forgiveness, and to live in thankful obedience. Amen.*

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Now by the authority and command of Jesus Christ, I declare to you the complete forgiveness of all your sin. Amen.