

Bible Study for Synod Assembly 2013

“The Office of the Keys”

A few years ago I suggested to our synod staff and Executive Committee that it might be good to spend some time at Synod Assembly focusing on fundamental Lutheran teachings, things included, for example, in Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*. We started with the Ten Commandments. We took a bit of a break last year and focused on the biblical basis for our strategic plan, but that, of course, had a lot to say about “Church.” And now, today, we return to an oft-neglected aspect of basic Lutheranism, “The Office of the Keys.” I don’t know this for a fact, but I suspect that there is some interest in having me lead you in studying this subject because it is, in fact, part of the foundational job description for bishops as discussed in the Augsburg Confession. Take a look at this small portion of Article 28:

Our people teach as follows. According to the gospel the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command (John 20:[21-23]): “As the Father has sent me, so I send you...Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

I hasten to assure you that this is also part of the *pastor’s* job description and, in fact, part of the job description for all of us. But it is fundamental to the ministry to which you have called me. So let’s talk about it.

The practice of “confession and absolution” differs widely, if it is practiced at all, among the various Christian traditions. Let’s just try the clicker-thing on this:

Click #1 if your congregation offers confession and forgiveness at every service of worship.

Watch it now:

Click #2 if it is offered only as part of the Service of Holy Communion.

Click #3 if you have an extended corporate confession and forgiveness on Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday.

Click #4 if Private Confession and Absolution is offered.

Click #5 for all of the above.

A Bit of Background

Bear with me a bit, please. I *think* I am something of a liturgical theologian, so I want to do a *quick* overview of the conduct of Confession and Absolution. It’s actually quite simple. It consists of one

or more Christians confessing their sins to another Christian or a group of Christians and then hearing the word of forgiveness spoken directly to those who have confessed. To confess one's sins is to name them either collectively or individually and to ask for forgiveness for them in the confidence that they can and will be forgiven by God and the community of Christians who act in God's name. To be absolved is to be loosed from beneath the burden of what has been confessed.

Our Lutheran Confessions refer to this as "The Office of the Keys" because Jesus described the authorization to forgive sins as the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Some traditions assign to the confessing penitent certain *tasks* to do or *prayers* to say in order to assist in the formation of one's life as a disciple. The danger in such a practice is that people are way-too-easily-given the impression that by such *acts* they are earning their forgiveness, at least in part, and that the death of Christ is therefore either partially unnecessary or partly insufficient in effecting forgiveness. That was one of Luther's problems with the church of his time. But there is another extreme: those churches where they've ceased offering this altogether, usually on the ground of arguments used in the sixteenth-century reforms of the abuses of it and also as a result of the idea of the priesthood of all believers popularized during that time: if all Christians may approach God *directly* and do not *need* to have forgiveness mediated through a pastor, why go to the pastor at all or have a cleric pronounce the forgiveness of sins to a congregation?

The Lutheran Confessions name The Office of the Keys – Confession and Forgiveness – a sacrament so at least confessionally speaking, we have three.

In the early church this sacrament was used for two primary purposes. Most often it was the means by which those persons known as "the lapsed ones" – for example, people who had "cracked" under the tactics of persecutors and who had either cursed Jesus or denied him as their Lord and had divulged the names and locations of other Christians – how they were brought back to the congregation. In some cases they were never allowed back. In other cases, if they repented and confessed their denial of Christ and their betrayal of others, they were forgiven. There was precedent for that practice, of course. Even the "chief" apostle, Peter, was a "lapsed one." Three times, under threat of persecution, he had cursed and sworn in denying that Jesus was his Lord (Mark 14:66-72).

The other major use of confession and absolution, especially in the Middle Ages, was for the benefit of those Christians who had not committed a public offense or endangered the lives of the community members, but whose consciences were burdened with one or more sins. Confession and absolution was available for such persons who desired to have the community share in *bearing* their burden in a very direct way, so that the sinner, now unburdened and not so consumed and preoccupied by the terrors of conscience, might be useful to others in the community and be one of the forgivers in that community as well as one of the forgiven. After all, how can you bear another's burden when one cannot even hold up under your own?

Thus far the liturgical history. Now to some images and a look at biblical texts.

Last autumn, Lois and I had the distinct privilege of traveling to Helsinki, Finland, and, from there, on to St. Petersburg, Russia. I was invited to speak about liturgical renewal at the Pastor's Conference of the Church of Finland and then we took a train from Helsinki to St. Petersburg. It was a wonderful trip and allowed us to check off the "bucket list" a visit to the Hermitage, the magnificent collection of art in St. Petersburg, and specifically to see this painting: Rembrandt's amazing *Return of the Prodigal Son*. I turned the corner into this rather small gallery and caught my breath at seeing this.

As I said earlier, Jesus himself directly commanded his disciples to forgive and to retain (that is, not-forgive) sins. But that command does not include a description of how you go about doing that forgiving. Other New Testament passages do. The Sacrament of Confession and Forgiveness, like the other sacraments, is acted-out gospel. The setting for the story line of this sacrament is always within a family situation of one kind or another: it takes place among the baptized, the members of Abba's family. In one way, the plot is very simple. Christians simply act out one of Jesus' great blasphemies, one of the things for which he got in big trouble: he forgave sins, and he told us that we should do likewise. But that simple script may easily be dressed up with one of Jesus' own story lines about how forgiveness is administered in families like Abba's.

Thus, the excellent example of this parable commonly known as the Prodigal Son. You can read it silently as I continue to tell it to you. (Luke 15:11-32)

One of the sons breaks up the family by collecting his inheritance even before his father is dead, and squanders that for which his father had spent his life working. When the full pain of what has occurred finally dawns on this son, he determines that he will go back home, confess his sin, and ask to be received back, perhaps not into the big house but at least into the servants' quarters. So back he goes. What *he does not know* is that the father, and presumably the whole family, has been looking down the street for him every day for all of the days his son has been gone, hoping desperately that this would be the day on which he would return.

And, today, here comes the son up the path! Out he runs to hug him and kiss him, and the son begins to blurt out his confession. He is a sinner against his parents – please note that one of the hands of the parent in Rembrandt's painting is distinctly feminine and one is masculine. Going on with the story: the son is prepared to confess that he is not worthy to be called a son. But he cannot even get the rest of his prepared speech out, the part about renting some of the servants' quarters, because the parent interrupts him. The father orders the festive clothing broken out of storage, the fatted calf slaughtered so that both veal piccata and veal parmigiana can be prepared, and the party begun immediately! "We've never quit setting your place at the table! Welcome back!"

This is a picture of God and God's family, us, at work. The work is the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness is not magic. It is not some formula learned in the seminary by clergy to be spoken only when the laity performs the first half of the rite. It is work. It is the whole family, even the self-

righteous older siblings who have a hard time swallowing all of the mercy which keeps overruling the justice, bearing the burden of what has occurred in the lives of the family members. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the inheritance is blown and cannot be recovered. No one will ever forget the pain of the months of separation. Parent and child might *each* be in need of therapy, in fact, just to cope with it all. But the family is restored. One who was dead is alive. And so long as the family bears the weight of what happened together, the burden is bearable. It cannot become something which isolates individuals and fractures the family.

Friends: forgiveness is work. It is putting oneself in the place of the sinner, even as Jesus Christ did, and bearing the burden and the pain of the sin. It is living as the wronged party without vindication. It is learning how to share even the pain which I have inflicted upon others, and standing under my own self-righteous condemnation of other sinners. It is the business of being the church.

This is not to say, however, that the Christian's or the church's life consists only in bearing pain and sharing grief. Remember that line from the parable and the hymn about calf and robe and ring! Fact is: all the story lines in the New Testament which have to do with lost ones returned or prodigals forgiven conclude with celebration and joy. That is the truest mark of the forgiven forgivers – their joy. Such joy is not giddiness, it's not some perpetual high. It's more like a quiet wholeness and peace which the Hebrew Scriptures describe with the word *shalom*. *Shalom* is the peace of having everything in its proper place, of having the lost found, of the sinners forgiven and restored to God's family.

Let me make this very clear because it has everything to do with my job and your job, it is at the burning center of our strategic plan, it is the point of the ministry of our synod:

**The church must always remember
to keep all of the places set at the family's table.**

No sin is too heavy for the family to bear. No sinner is unwelcome at the table. Our Father-Mother God's will is that eventually all the kids are home. They are never forgotten.

And that leads us to another family forgiveness text, this one: Matthew 18:15-17.

This is the famous text which describes the procedure of church discipline. If a member of the family sins against another, the matter should first be taken up privately. If, however, the sinner, will not hear the other family member, that one should take along two or three other family members to confirm what he or she has to say. Finally, if they are still not heard by the sinner, the matter should go before the whole church – that is, before the congregation-family. If the person will not even listen to what the whole congregation has to say, then that person is to be treated as a Gentile and a tax collector.

But let's be really careful here. This text is easily twisted into something which it is not. It is not grounds for excluding sinners or for vindicating those who have been wronged.

Several features of Matthew 18 indicate that it has a very different thrust and that it is read properly only by those who are still crying out to their Abba. First of all, what is it that the church or any of its members has to say to a sinner? Members of the church have certainly not become wiser or more adept at escaping sin. We are, at the same time, sinners and saints. Oh, to be sure, we have renounced the devil, the world, and the flesh – but we have *not* escaped them, right? Right??? Therefore, we have only one word to say to sinners. It is the just and merciful Father's word: I forgive you.

If sinners do not hear or listen to that word, it is likely that they do not consider themselves sinners. Then, of course, their sins are retained, they go unforgiven, at least to all appearances. God has, after all, been known to chase a single lamb, sweep for a lost coin, but God does not force forgiveness and mercy on anyone, either. God does not coerce. But, because rejecting mercy is very dangerous business, the church, God's family, us, keeps trying to get the sinner to hear the message of forgiveness for Christ's sake, even if it requires having a family gathering – call it a congregational meeting – in which every last member of the family takes a try at getting the message across in a trustable fashion. If the family cannot be restored even by such a measure, the erring family member should be treated like a Gentile or a tax collector, that is, an outsider.

But watch it again. Think about this question:

How do you treat Gentiles and tax collectors?

Another part of Jesus' scandalous behavior was that he continually ate with them and counted himself among them. He joined them on their side. He bore their burden. He never gave up on anyone, it seems. And back home in the family they are still setting a place for every Gentile and every tax collector at the table, waiting for the day when they will be back and the family restored. In the meantime, family members are out hunting for them and eating with them in their places of isolation, reminding them that their place at the family table is still set.

How do I justify this interpretation? By the story which *precedes* it, Matthew 18:10-14.

This is Matthew's version of the parable of the lost sheep. There the Father is compared with a shepherd who is willing to leave his ninety-nine sheep in the mountains while he goes off in search of a single lost one. It's *not* because the shepherd has this obsessive-compulsive "thing" about having an even hundred, since the fastest way to have only one sheep is to leave ninety-nine in the mountains and go off in search of a loner. No. The shepherd, God, is hung up on *lost* ones, not on round numbers. Matthew suggests that the family learn to operate like God, to live by God's Spirit, and to have the same incurable hang-up over every single lost sinner.

True, it is neither fair nor just to operate that way, to save the big parties for the returns of the prodigals. But that is the only kind of parties there are in the reign of God. And what about the family members who run away repeatedly or keep renewing their Gentile status or insist on collecting taxes? Matthew has an answer for that question, too, in this same forgiveness chapter (Matthew 18:21).

Peter asks how often a family member ought to be forgiven, thinking by all that is fair, there should be a limit somewhere. But Jesus responds that in the Family of God the capacity for forgiveness expands by geometric proportions and in the end knows no bounds.

The Office of the Keys – Confession and Forgiveness, therefore, describes the inner workings of the family of God. Along with the Lord's Supper, it is what keeps the family together. It is the *only* thing that keeps the family together. For the family is not maintained by the will of its members or by its moral superiority. Its glue is the forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness is work. And everyone in the family is charged with doing it. It is not confined to particular people or to particular situations. Even when the pastor, on behalf of whole family, pronounces the forgiveness which every member is really empowered to say, forgiveness remains the work of the whole community. The whole family together pledges, in that absolution, that they will in fact bear the burdens of the terrified and aching ones in the community.

And just as baptism is not magic or something to get and forget about like a vaccination, so forgiveness of sins is the whole life's work of a Christian. To forgive is, in a broad sense, to live by the Spirit, to live compassionately, constantly putting oneself in the position of the sinners encountered in every minute of every day. Sometimes the forgiven ones will not even catch on that some anonymous forgiver has done the Spirit's work on them, even as Jesus died for a lot of folks who never caught on to the great forgiveness which took place. Christ died in the place of, and for the sake of, a world which hardly noticed. So it also happens when the forgiven forgivers of Abba's Family take their forgiveness out of confining buildings into all the world. Then, you see, the story of how our sins have been forgiven will never end.

Thank you.

Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo
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