

## Sermon at Vespers with Corporate Confession and Forgiveness

Society of the Holy Trinity General Retreat, September 27, 2006

St. Mary of the Lake Conference Center, Mundelein, Illinois

**Pastor Ronald B. Bagnall, STS**

Farmingdale, Maine

My favorite character of all time is an anonymous person about whom we know very little, but what we do know makes this character an example for all of us. He appears once in an early edition of the *Small Catechism*,<sup>[1]</sup> in which he is simply called a "simple common man." But by knowing the time and place of his brief appearance we can easily construct the following scene.<sup>[2]</sup>

Wittenberg. 1529. Saturday afternoon. St. Mary's parish church. The schoolboys have sung Vespers, which included Psalm 145 with its centerpiece, "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." One of the clerics has preached on John's gospel — perhaps chapter 8, in which Jesus says, "He who is of God hears the words of God," and concludes, "I AM!" Now the parish priests take to their confessional chairs, and parishioners line up to make confession and receive absolution before receiving communion on the morrow.

Enter the common man. As he approaches the confessional chair, he recognizes the father confessor; it is none other than Dr. Luther. Imagine how we would have felt. But not our common man. He kneels and says, "Reverend and dear sir, I ask you, for God's sake, to give me good counsel for the consolation of my soul." Then he makes his confession of sins, which could be yours or mine:

I, a poor human being, confess and lament to you, and before God my Lord, that I am a sinful and weak person. I do not keep God's commandments. I do not really believe the Gospel. I do nothing good. I cannot suffer evil. Especially I have done this and that... which burdens my conscience. Therefore, I ask you, in God's stead, to forgive me and comfort me with God's Word.

At this point we may assume that Luther granted absolution, but immediately raised a question about communion: "Why do you also want to receive the Sacrament of the Altar?" Now our simple common man proves to be not so simple or common, for he answers back, "Because I want my soul to be strengthened with God's Word *and* sacraments and to obtain grace."

Luther presses the issue, "But don't you have forgiveness of sins in the confessional?" The common man retorts, "So what! I want to add God's sacrament to his Word. To have God's Word in many ways is so much better!"

What guts! What insight! What profound faith! If this little incident actually happened — namely, that, like the Syrophoenician woman of a few Sundays ago, our common man threw back the words of the preacher — then it is no wonder that in the next editions of the catechism, Luther put the emphasis on the absolution and faith.<sup>[3]</sup>

Everything after confession of sin now turns on faith and belief — three times — a triple emphasis:

God be gracious to you and strengthen your *faith*.  
Do you *believe* that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?  
As you *believe* so be it done to you.

First, "God be gracious to you and strengthen your faith." The reply to that pronouncement can only be AMEN — actually writ large, in capital letters in the original catechism. Amen — is not the Hebrew root of Amen also the root of verbs for faith: to trust and to believe? To say Amen is to have confidence that God is our Father and that we are his children.

Second, "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" That is the ultimate question, and the only question that can be asked at this point of turning from confession of sin to forgiveness of sin. The issue is no longer our sins but God's forgiveness.

Third, "As you believe so be it done to you." The final word is none other than Jesus' word that healed the centurion's paralyzed servant, none other than Jesus' word that opened the eyes of two blind men, none other than Jesus' word that cast out the demon from the Syrophoenician woman's daughter.

That Jesus has the last word in confession puts the emphasis where it ought to be: because his word is *faithful*, *believable*, and *trustworthy*, we too may cry out, sometimes even with tears, "I believe, help my unbelief."

But too often, especially in confession of sin, we put the *emphasis* in the wrong place. Enter my second favorite character, Johannes of Ravelunda. He appears in the opening chapter of *The Hammer of God*.<sup>[4]</sup>

Johannes, like us, was (as he confessed) "conceived and born in sin" and "deserved eternal condemnation." He, also like us, had (as he confessed) "sinned against the holy and righteous God and his holy commandments by thought, word, and deed." But more than that Johannes, as is often the case with us human beings — well at least with me — was (again as he confessed) a "poor miserable sinner" — with the *emphasis* on "miserable."

Now there's nothing worse than miserable sinners. They cling to their sins, and they're no different from unrepentant sinners who ignore or excuse their sins. Actually a miserable sinner is an unrepentant sinner, for true repentance is of necessity coupled with belief in the gospel of forgiveness. You can't have one without the other. "Repent and believe in the Gospel" — that's Jesus' first word.

Johannes, the "miserable sinner," is not unlike us preachers when we go great guns in shooting down the faults and failures of fellow sinners, but fail to be as sharp and clear about forgiveness and faith. Johannes had so focused his heart and soul, mind and strength on the first half of confession that he had overlooked the second half. Since most of you did not grow up in a church that used the same confession of sins that Johannes said, let me read the second half with its dramatic turning point just after acknowledging before God that we are worthy to be cast away from his presence if he should judge us according to our sins.<sup>[5]</sup>

But thou, heavenly Father, hast promised to receive with tender mercy all penitent sinners, who return unto thee and with a living faith seek refuge in thy Fatherly compassion and in the merits of the Savior Jesus Christ. Their transgressions thou wilt not regard, nor impute unto them their sins. Relying upon thy promise, I confidently beseech thee to be merciful and gracious unto me and to forgive me all my sins, to the praise and glory of thy holy Name.

Now there's a sermon for miserable sinners as well as unrepentant sinners, to say nothing of those who consciously die daily to sin. It's the goal of every form of confession — public or private, corporate or individual — yes, even the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

If we come to confession in order to get something off of our chest — that is good, or to clear our conscience — that too is good, or to acknowledge some dark secret — that also is good. But the goal is not saying our words, but hearing God's Word. The goal of confessing sins is in the turning point of forgiveness and faith. This turning point is a shift in emphasis from our sins to God's forgiveness — a forgiveness that strengthens our faith so that our faith in turn may hold onto that same forgiveness.

Back to John's gospel, chapter 8. Ultimately it's all about the one who dares to say the shortest sentence "I AM." You and I can't do that; for us it's an incomplete sentence. We have to add some kind of description: "I am a troubled and penitent sinner." "I am a poor sinful being." "I am guilty of many sins." "I am sorry." God doesn't have to do that; God just is. And so the Son of God says, "I AM."

The first time God said that short sentence was when he made himself known to Moses on Mount Sinai.<sup>[6]</sup> Moses asked for God's name, and God simply answered, "I AM — I AM WHO I AM." At a later time on Mount Sinai,<sup>[7]</sup> Moses asked to see God in all his glory, and God simply answered with his name — a noun linked to the verb to be — a noun we dare only to say as "LORD." The verb form behind the noun "LORD" is the same old sentence "I AM." But then, as if God were to recognize our human need for complete sentences, he becomes a preacher and preaches to us precisely who he is and what a lord does:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...

And so began a long-standing tradition that has its roots in the law of Moses, and extends through the words of the prophets to the songs of the psalmist: "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."<sup>[8]</sup>

These are the very words that Johannes had overlooked in the confession of sin. They became the very words that Savonius almost shouted as they both recited the second half of the confession: "Relying upon thy promise, I confidently beseech thee to be merciful and gracious unto me and to forgive me all my sins..." And they became the very words that brought Johannes to faith and forgiveness.

"The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." These are the very words from Psalm 145 that the schoolboys would have sung at Vespers on Saturday afternoon in St. Mary's parish church in Wittenberg. Would the common man have understood these words since they would have been sung in Latin? Of course not! But preachers like Johannes Bugenhagen and Martin Luther would have so translated and repeated them that the common man would have been able not only to confess his sin but also to confess his faith: "I want my soul to be strengthened with God's Word *and* sacraments and to obtain grace... I want to add God's sacrament to his Word. To have God's Word in many ways is so much better!"

Dear fellow pastors, remember: we stand in a long line of prophets and psalmists, preachers and confessors, who have repeatedly proclaimed, "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." This is most certainly true. AMEN

— Ronald B. Bagnall (Sept. 27, 2006)

---

## References

[1] "A Short order of Confession Before the Priest for the Common Man" (1529) in *Luther's Works*, v. 53, pp. 116–118 (Fortress Press, 1965). Cf., "A Short Method of Confessing to the Priest, for the Use of Simple Folk" (1529) in *Works of Martin Luther*, v. 6, pp. 215f. (Muhlenberg Press, 1932).

[2] "The German Mass and Order of Service" (1526) in *Luther's Works*, v. 53, p. 68 (Fortress Press, 1965): "the evangelist John, who so mightily teaches faith, has his own day too, on Saturday afternoon at Vespers."

[3] "How One Should Teach Common Folk to Shrive Themselves" (1531) in *Luther's Works*, v. 53, pp. 119–121 (Fortress Press, 1965).

[4] *The Hammer of God*, pp. 32f. (Augustana Press, 1960); or pp. 27f. (Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

[5] *The Hymnal and Order of Service*, pp. 563, 594, 615 (Augustana Book Concern, 1925).

[6] Exodus 3:14.

[7] Exodus 33:19; 34:5f.

[8] E.g., Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; cf., Numbers 14:18.

---

*Society of the Holy Trinity*

contact: [webmaster@societyholytrinity.org](mailto:webmaster@societyholytrinity.org)

Copyright © 2006 Society of the Holy Trinity. All rights reserved.

Posted -- 10 October 2006

Home Page: [www.societyholytrinity.org](http://www.societyholytrinity.org)