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Midweek Lent IV  
13 March 2013  
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita  
*Praying the Faith: Holy Absolution*

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*

For most of you the words, *Private Confession*, automatically call to mind  
a dark room,  
with a sliding screen door,  
and the phrase: “*Father, it’s been 3 years since my last confession.*”

That mental picture, again for most, isn’t because you’ve ever actually done it,  
but because that’s how it is on TV.

Private Confession and Absolution is now a strange thing for Lutherans—  
but it wasn’t always that way.

It used to be, both for Luther and the early Lutherans—even the first LCMS Lutherans—  
that Private Confession and Absolution was not only encouraged,  
but a *regular practice* among both pastors and laity.

Our Catechism assumes this regular practice and the Augsburg Confession says clearly,  
“*Our churches teach that private Absolution should be retained in the churches*” (AC XI).

We seem to have forgotten where we’ve come from and who we properly are.

Now the question is: *Why?*

Why’d we lose the practice?  
Why’d we have it in the first place?  
Why would it be good to get back in this habit?

There are a number of reasons we lost the practice—too many to get in to here.  
But among them was the separation of Private Confession from the Sanctuary—  
moving it somewhere less formal, more comfortable, like the pastor’s study.

This ended up tying the comfort to the man rather than the ministry,  
of which the man is a servant.

But better than how we lost it, is why we had it in the first place—  
and with that, why we should recover the habit of hearing our Lord’s voice of forgiveness.

Now, we don’t do anything simply because that’s the way we’ve always done it.

Every tradition, every ceremony, every gesture and word and confession and liturgy—  
all of it is there because it serves and delivers the Gospel.

That’s what the Church is all about—the saints of Christ gathered around the Gospel.

And the Gospel isn't just any word about God,  
 it's a very specific word, a word that changes us, a word that creates faith within us,  
 a word that saves us.

The Gospel is Jesus Christ crucified, dead, buried, and risen *for you!*  
 The Gospel is the Judge's verdict that you are free, forgiven, and alive with the risen Son.  
 The Gospel gives the gifts of God, it destroys Satan, it raises the dead, it draws you into Christ—  
 in a word, it's the Gospel alone that saves: *Christ Jesus for you!*

Gospel means, "*good news*".  
 Good news is that you're not guilty anymore for your sins.  
 They've been taken away and hung on the cross—paid in full.

The Word that does all this, the Gospel, is often called "*the absolution.*"  
 To be forgiven is to be *absolved*, washed, cleansed.

So our Confessions say,  
*"because of the great benefit of Absolution,  
 and because it is otherwise useful to the conscience,  
 Confession is retained among us"* (AC XXV).

Private Absolution is the preaching of the Gospel to individual sinners.<sup>1</sup>

And that's why we have it and why we should come back to it.  
 For the sake of hearing the Gospel just for me—  
 because I need it.

Think about it this way:  
 Psychologists and therapists of all sorts make loads of money by getting you to lie down,  
 and search your heart,  
 revealing your deepest pains, greatest angers, and most sorry regrets.

They listen, counsel you on things to do to move along, and perhaps proscribe some medicine if  
 that's needed.

This is all certainly good—  
 but they can't ultimately offer any real healing.  
 They can't remove your guilt or free you from it.

The most they can do is help you face up to it, admit it, bring it into the open.

What you need is the Gospel.  
 You need the guilt and grief, sorrow and pain that's rested deep down for years to be removed.  
 You need to be washed and cleansed—you need the *absolution*.

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from the *1856 Northern District Proceedings* come from Fred Precht, "Confession and Absolution," *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis: CPH, 1993): 334-81.

And the one who offers this absolution is Christ Jesus alone.

He takes your sin on Himself and hangs it on the cross.  
He bears your burden, suffers your loss, and dies your death.

Now, what if I told you that you could hear this voice of Jesus today?  
What if I told you that in the midst of all the lies of Satan, all the accusations, all the:  
    you're not good enough, you can't get past this, this is too big, you're too deep into it—  
    what if in the midst of all that, the voice of Jesus could be heard?

That's what John's Gospel tells us today.  
The Risen Jesus Himself appeared to His disciples behind closed doors, and said:  
    *"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 anyone, they are forgiven"* (Jn 20:21-22)

These men are called forth to be the servants of His word.  
They're instruments, tools—  
    or as Luther said in one of his sermons, *"spoons, dishing out the Lord's gifts"*.

The forgiveness they speak isn't from themselves, or found inside of them—  
it's all from Christ.

The pastor stands *"in the stead and by the command of Christ;"*  
and he's put there just for you.

He's put there as the ear and then the mouth of Christ.

Do you need to come?  
Do you need to privately confess your sins?  
Absolutely not.

But if you've got them—  
    if you're weighed down, saddened, and hurt by what you've done—  
    then come to the voice of Jesus.

Come to where God has promised to heal and forgive, to give you peace and comfort.  
The sins we bear are real sins.  
For that we need a real savior, with real words, with real comfort.  
That's what's being delivered.

Here you *hear* the very voice of God speaking just to you,  
    addressing just *your* sins,  
    comforting just *your* sorrow.  
    Here the Gospel comes *to you*.

Luther, in his Large Catechism sums it up this way:

*“If you were a Christian, then you ought to be happy to run more than a hundred miles to Confession and not let yourself be urged to come ...*

*When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian. If I have brought you to the point of being a Christian, I have thereby also brought you to Confession.<sup>2</sup>*

As Paul says, *“God makes His appeal through us,”*

and so *“We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”* (2 Cor 5:20)

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*

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<sup>2</sup> “A Brief Exhortation to Confession,” 653.