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Midweek Lent IV  
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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*

“We have always urged that Confession should be voluntary and that the pope’s tyranny should cease.”

That’s how Luther begins his *Brief Exhortation to Confession* that was included in the Large Catechism.

What is the pope’s *tyranny*?

I think it’s the reason why going to Private Confession is so foreign among us today. We’ve never really gotten past it.

The pope’s tyranny is threefold:

First, everyone *had* to go to confession.

If you didn’t, you were in fear of committing a most-serious mortal sin.

Second, your conscience was burdened by having to remember and list *every* sin.

You could never confess perfectly enough.

And third—and Luther calls this the worst of all—no one ever taught the comfort it gives.

No wonder people hated confession!

It was sheer terror and torture.

You had to do it; and you had to do it just right; and you could never be sure at the end of the day.

Luther’s greatest contribution to the practice of private Confession was lifting these three oppressive things.

You no longer *had to* go to confession, but now you were free to go.

No coercion of fear.

You no longer *had to* torture yourself by listing every sin, or making some up just in case.

As the Psalms say, “*Who can discern his errors?*” (Ps 19:12)

And best of all—Confession was now taught in a way that brings peace to troubled consciences.

For Luther, it was all about the Absolution,

*that is forgiveness from the Pastor as from God Himself.*

As history goes, Private Confession was better known among Lutherans as Private Absolution.

A private, or individual hearing of the Gospel,

a direct word from God about my sin in particular,

and His grace that covers all.

Confession was no longer coerced, torturous, or something to be feared.

It was free.

But what is it that sinners do when they're free?  
 What do you do, when you don't have to do something?  
 Well, you don't do it.

The typical arguments are:

*Why do I have to go to Confession?*  
*Why do I have to confess to a man, when I can go to God directly?*  
*Why private confession when we have public confession every Sunday?*  
*Why list sins individually, when I cover 'em all generally?*

And there are more.

But all of these flow from a misuse of freedom.  
 And freedom is most misused through unbelief.

Faith doesn't let us set the Lord's gifts against each other.

It's not Baptism or Communion;

but Baptism, Communion, the preaching of the Gospel, and the whole Christian Church!

Faith clings to the gifts of God.

It acts freely and joyfully.

There's no joy in "why do I have to" questions.

Those don't spring from faith, but unbelief.

But if we believe that the forgiveness coming from the Pastor's mouth is the Lord's forgiveness,  
 and if we love our Lord and His word,  
 then why wouldn't we run to hear it?

And if sin still wears me down—

like Luther says:

if I still have flesh and blood,

and still live in this sinful world,

and still have the devil accusing me night and day—

then why wouldn't I want to confess all that to God and seek His help?

Confession is a treasure for Christians—

not because it's a good work we do for God—

but because it's a way of receiving His good work for us!

Luther again says in the Large Catechism,

*"Whoever is a Christian or would like to be one is here faithfully advised to go and get the precious treasure."*

Treasure.

That's Private Absolution.

And that's far from the way we think of it.

I blame the pope's tyranny for that.  
And I blame our unbelief and misuse of freedom as well.

It used to be that the primary form of pastoral care in the Missouri Synod was Private Absolution.  
It's not anymore.  
But it should be.

So what holds you back?  
Is it unbelief and a lack of desire to hear the Lord's word?  
Is it a fear of disappointing me or thinking I'll judge you differently or tell what you've done?

Please, do not fear.

If you know your sin, if it makes you sick and troubles you, if you've got any guilt or shame,  
then come and make use of the healing medicine that is Christ's own word of forgiveness.

Run to confession just like the Prodigal returning to his father;  
and you'll find that in this Private Absolution it is the Father who runs to you!

Tell the truth like David that you deserve to die for your sin.  
And hear the promise of Nathan, the Lord's Prophet:  
*"You shall not die. The Lord has put away your sin."*

If you are a Christian, you don't need any coercion to confess and believe.  
In fact, you'll beg me for His gifts—as I've been put into this office to distribute them.

Let nothing be by force, but let your confession be free.  
And freely run to it.  
Run to the place the Lord meets you with His word.  
Run to his grace and His mercy.

As Luther closes his bit on Confession in the Catechism he says,  
*"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."*

May it be so for you as well.

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