

A minister once commented: “In the United States, everything is permitted,.... [but] practically nothing is forgiven. By contrast, in the Church much is not permitted.... while much is not permitted, everything can be forgiven. Our culture pulls us towards vengeance; our faith towards mercy.”

Whether individuals know it or not, what the world needs more than anything is forgiveness. We don’t need someone to say, “It’s okay.” We need someone to say, “You’re right, what you did was wrong, but God in Jesus Christ has forgiven you.”

Today as we examine our Gospel text, we see Jesus providing a means by which we can know we’re forgiven. **“Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.””** From this we learn: **THE CHURCH CALLS PASTORS TO SERVE AS "FORGIVENESS OFFICERS."**

First, I. Jesus gives the church the office of the keys to call pastors. It is ironic that this all takes place as the disciples gather behind locked doors. Think of the guilt that they must have felt having abandoned Jesus and now hearing reports that He came back to life. They must have thought that Jesus would be out to take revenge on them. Jesus passes through the locked doors not for vengeance but for mercy. Twice He tells them peace be with you. Jesus said, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** He forgives them their sins, freeing them from the locked door of their guilt. Jesus then sends out the disciples to be apostles, that is, sent ones, to do what?

He sends them to forgive sins. **“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”** In the church we call this authority the office of the keys. It comes from a similar passage where Jesus says to Peter, **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**” The office of the keys is an authority by which the gates of heaven are locked and unlocked.

Martin Luther explains it in the Small Catechism: “The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.” Christ gives this power to the Church, but it is carried out publicly through pastors. To this end, the Church calls pastors.

Pastors are placed in an office, that is, something that is bigger than they are, and something that is granted from outside of themselves. I don’t pronounce

the forgiveness of sins as Jacob Eichers. I don't consecrate the elements of the Lord's Supper as Jacob Eichers. If I were to be removed from the ministry, those responsibilities would be taken away from me in an instant. **“As the Father is sending me, so I am sending you.”** This sending of pastors takes place as congregations call pastors to serve in their midst as forgiveness officers.

In many ways, we could draw an analogy to police officers. Their ability to arrest someone or write tickets are responsibilities granted by the communities they serve. A random person could not decide to make himself a police officer and start arresting people.

In the same way, at the heart of the pastoral office is proclaiming the forgiveness of sins found in God's Word. Paul writes to his protégé Timothy, **“preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”** Pastors are in their prime when they are doing this task.

However, the flip side of this is, II. These forgiveness officers may work with the church to withhold forgiveness. Jesus said, **“If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”** The difficult part of the job that pastors have is to speak the truth of the Bible to others, even if it is a hard truth. The truth is this: that those who do not believe in Jesus will die in their sins and be sent to hell. In this case, the gate of heaven is closed.

This applies to people who were never Christians, but this also applies to people who once were Christians but are no longer or call themselves Christians and live a life that embraces sin and feels no need to ask for forgiveness.

The Ten Commandments guide us, and a habitual, unrepentant violation of any of these commandments is grounds for use of the withholding of forgiveness. Examples might include being part of a secret society such as the freemasons which acts as a false religion teaching salvation by works. This breaks the first commandment, you shall have no other gods.

Belonging to an extremist group on either side of the political spectrum which would advocate for hatred and violence of others is another example where the church may call an individual to repentance. This violates the fifth commandment, you shall not murder. In a high-profile case two years ago, even the magazine Rolling Stone reported on a case where an LCMS pastor in conjunction with his congregation formally excommunicated a man in their congregation for espousing neo-Nazi ideology. This racist and violent behavior

was condemned by even our Synod president, our highest-ranking church leader.

Although our society has normalized it, living together in a romantic fashion before or apart from marriage goes against God’s design for humanity. Refusal to repent may result in the pastor working alongside the congregation to pronounce that forgiveness is withheld because it violates the sixth commandment, you shall not commit adultery. These are just a few examples, of course there are other situations this may come up.

Another word for police officer is law enforcement officer. This strikes at the heart of what their vocation is. Cities, towns, and counties hire law enforcement to enforce the laws of the land. Police don’t make the rules, they just enforce them. Someone unhappy with their speeding ticket ultimately has to talk to a judge, not the policeman.

As pastors work with the congregation to warn sinners to repent, we like a police officer arresting someone in the act of a crime, don’t have the final say. Each suspected criminal has his day in court. We can’t look into people’s hearts. However, we as the church can simply commend them to the judge, Jesus Himself, who will come to judge the living and the dead. Nonetheless, we want to guide them to live a life of forgiveness by the power of the Holy Spirit turning away from sin and assure that the gates of heaven are indeed open to them.

Finally, III. These forgiveness officers work to proclaim forgiveness. A police officer will tell you that the best day is when she didn’t have to write any tickets, and she didn’t have to stop any crimes in progress. I think any police officer would love to be out of a job due to lack of crime. Further, any police officer would tell you his most effective weapon is not on his holster, but between his nose and chin. Using clear communication can prevent conflicts from escalating.

In the same vein, that’s why pastors wear collars, to recognize that the most valuable thing they have to offer comes from their vocal cords. Namely, the word of God which forgives sins. Remember the words of that minister from earlier in the sermon? In the Church everything can be forgiven! Don’t trust him, trust Jesus who said, **“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”**

Freemasons can gladly be welcomed back into the church and forgiven, but repentance looks like leaving that organization. Racist extremists have a place in Christ’s family, given that they turn from their violence and hatred. God calls couples living together apart from marriage to live in chastity before

marriage, in many cases, this means moving apart before the wedding day. There is forgiveness for those who have fallen prey to that sin, also! Jesus forgives couples who lived together before marriage!

The Lord has given the gift of confession and absolution to the Church to free souls trapped in the devil's prison of guilt, shame, and sin. This looks like the confession and absolution that happens in a general sense at the beginning of many of our services. But this also looks like individual confession and absolution, and yes, Lutherans do that, not just Roman Catholics.

Of course, we don't require it, unlike the Roman Catholics, but it is a gift to comfort the souls of those who are tormented over sins. Pastors vow to keep what is confessed to them secret to their graves. Pastors who cannot keep that confessional seal ought to be removed from the ministry.

The congregation calls a pastor to be the voice of Christ in the midst of the congregation. I haven't heard the voice of Jesus, but I have heard the voice of my father confessor say, "Jacob, as a called and ordained servant of the word, I forgive you all your sins." By faith I believe that's just as good as if Jesus said it to me.

I do want to clarify, let's go back to John 20, "**When he had said [Peace be with you], he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.**" This forgiveness flows from the pierced hands and side of Christ. You can pray for forgiveness directly from God without the aid of a pastor. I don't have a lockdown on that forgiveness. A fellow Christian can remind you of the forgiveness of Christ.

When I say police officers enforce the law, I'm not saying you can't ask a stranger to get off your lawn. But there's something more authoritative to the voice of a cop asking the stranger to get off your lawn. The two aren't in competition. In the same way, the forgiveness the pastor proclaims as the representative of Christ is not in competition or to the exclusion of the forgiveness we proclaim to others or to ourselves.

Dear Christian friend, fear not. Jesus Christ has forgiven your sins. Rejoice! What's more, you have called me to serve in this place to pronounce that forgiveness to you. Get your money's worth out of me because I have no greater joy than to share that joy of forgiveness with you whether it be in the church service, in a private conversation in my study, or in the sanctuary. John the evangelist writes, "**I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.**" What a great joy it is to walk in the forgiveness of Christ!