

“And when [Jesus] 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.’”

On this Second Sunday of Easter, we gather to embark on a journey through John’s first epistle. This will take us throughout the season of Easter until mid-May. I am going to divide this into two halves. Our first half, Alive in Christ, will talk about how the reality of Easter translates into the way we live our lives day to day. The second half, God is Love, will explore what God’s love means, how we can know God loves us, and how we can share that good news with others.

Today has colloquially been known as Doubting Thomas Sunday because every year we read the account of Thomas’ doubts about the Risen Christ. However, I would like to reframe this as being Confession and Absolution Sunday. We focus so much on Thomas’ denial that we lose sight of the first half of the chapter wherein Jesus breathes on His disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit to forgive and retain sins.

This emphasis dovetails beautifully with our Epistle lesson wherein John lays out the beauty of confession and forgiveness. Our theme for today: THROUGH CONFESSION & ABSOLUTION, THE SPIRIT BREATHES LIFE INTO US. Our sermon title is spiritual breathing, and confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness from God is as essential as breathing is. If we stop this pattern, it doesn’t take long before we suffocate. After all, I. Only the dead don't breathe.

We can see this stubbornness in the likes of someone like Thomas who said, **“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”**

In the same vein, John gives us several warnings about living a life of impenitence. **“If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.... If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”**

Luther writes regarding the Sacrament of Holy Communion in his preface to the Small Catechism. “Those who do not hold the sacrament in high esteem indicate that they have no sin, no flesh, no devil, no world, no death, no dangers, no hell. That is, they believe they have none of these things, although they are up to their neck in them and belong to the devil twice over. On the other hand, they indicate that they need no grace, no life, no paradise, no heaven, no Christ, no God, nor any other good thing. For if they believed that they had so much evil and needed so much good, they would not neglect the sacrament, in which help against such evil is provided and in which so much good is given.”

To be clear, the forgiveness offered in the Lord's Supper is of the same type that we receive through confessing our sins to God and receiving forgiveness. We can apply many of those same thoughts to confessing our sins to God. How often do we think that we're generally pretty good? How often do we convince ourselves that if we sin, it's not very much, and we're only being human? We don't need to confess anything to anyone.

The primary purpose of gathering here for worship is to receive the forgiveness of sins. Yet how easy it is to forego Sunday worship one week, and the one week turns into two, and then two weeks turns into once a quarter then only at Christmas and Easter? How often are our prayers for forgiveness put off until a better time and then we forget them altogether? Would we not rather hold a grudge and get even rather than forgive those around us? Is it not easier to say I don't sin much instead of asking Jesus to forgive us?

When this cycle of confession and absolution breaks, we run the risk of spiritual asphyxiation. When we claim we have no sin, we walk in the darkness, we deceive ourselves, and we make God out to be a liar, also.

However, John lays out the many benefits of confessing our sins. II. The Spirit uses confession & absolution to exhale sin and receive forgiveness from Jesus. John gives us three images. First, **“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”** As the Holy Spirit works in us to convict us of our sins, we confess what we have done wrong to God. Jesus' blood is sufficient to cleanse us from our sins. The blood that was shed on Calvary is delivered to you by faith even today as we partake of Holy Communion. The blood of Christ washes over us as we receive the promise of sins forgiven when we confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness.

Second, John assures us, **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** As we get in the habit of confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness, we can know that the Lord amply and abundantly forgives our sins.

Third, John continues, **“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”** When you're in need of a defense attorney, you keep your mouth shut among law enforcement, but you spill your heart and soul to the defense attorney. You do this so that way he can do his work in acquitting you. As we stand before the judgment throne of God, we only need to keep our mouths shut and let Jesus do the talking. He is our defense attorney, and His blood covers our sins.

The Holy Spirit uses the pattern of confessing our sin to God and receiving forgiveness from Him as a means to breathe life into our souls. Indeed, by this spiritual breathing, we are alive in Christ!

At this point, I wanted to take some time to address some practical concerns about this idea of confession and absolution. III. There are many ways the Spirit can breathe life into us in this fashion. Simply put, what does this practice look like?

I like to use the illustration of a funnel that goes from general to more specific ways in which the Lord gives us the gift of confession and absolution. It's not that one is better than another or that with one you're more forgiven than another. However, sometimes we need specific means to address specific sins.

The top of the funnel is confession and absolution in our daily devotional life. This is something that I encourage people to practice daily. As you read your daily devotion, take time to pray to God about ways in which you've sinned, and believe that God in Christ Jesus has forgiven you. In the bulletin, I included an insert that has useful passages to consider of the assurance of our forgiveness of sins. This is the most general form but is the most frequent form.

Going down the funnel, I have the general confession and absolution in worship. This is something that is often paired with preparation for the Lord's Supper, as such, we typically only have this on communion Sundays. This is more specific as not only do we read a general confession out loud, but we have time to confess sins silently before God, and then to hear the forgiveness of sins proclaimed out loud by the pastor.

Next in line I included confessional conversation with another lay Christian. This is something that perhaps would be less frequent than the corporate confession and absolution we have at church, but would provide specific comfort as another Christian friend could share with you the good news that Christ has forgiven specific sins. As Christians we are freed to proclaim that forgiveness to other fellow believers.

Finally, I have individual confession and absolution before a pastor as the most specific form of confession and absolution. It is an opportunity to have specific things that have been bothering you brought before the Lord to have them forgiven by name by someone who is called to be a messenger of Jesus. In this rite, the penitent confesses that the pastor's forgiveness is God's forgiveness, and that it is as though God Himself were forgiving the confessor. This is a rite anyone can take advantage of by reaching out to me to set up an appointment. I am sworn to confidentiality as part of my very ordination vows.

As you can see, confession and absolution is a wonderful gift that God showers upon His Church, the Holy Spirit offers us many ways to make use of this gift. May the Lord empower you to enact this practice of spiritual breathing!