

Confession and Forgiveness: not just for Sunday morning

By Ted Kober

One Sunday, after the people had confessed their sins, the pastor proclaimed, “As a called and ordained servant of the Word, I announce that God says, ‘That’s okay. No problem. Don’t worry about it. You should be sorry! Don’t ever do it again! I forgive you, but I don’t want anything to do with you!’ ”

The congregation stood in stunned silence. He continued, “What’s the matter? Isn’t that how you forgive one another? But you don’t expect God to forgive you that way?”

Following his sermon on forgiveness, he properly absolved his people.

Sin is never “okay.” Sin is never “no problem.” There is only one cure for sin—forgiveness through Christ. Without Christ, there is no forgiveness from God and no comfort to give.

The unbelieving world uses phrases such as “That’s okay” or “It’s no problem” because it has no good alternative. Such people are left either to excuse the offense or hold it against the offender.

As ONE People—Forgiven, we have been given a different way.

Several weeks after this pastor shocked his congregation, a young couple approached him. “We want to thank you, Pastor, for teaching us a new culture.” “What do you mean?” he asked. “You know, the language of Christians,” the wife answered. The husband explained: “This past week we had a fight in the kitchen. But this time we ended it with the new way you taught us. We used words like ‘I confess’ and ‘I forgive because Christ forgave us.’ You’re helping us change the culture in our home.”

Sometimes we act like confession and forgiveness are something we do only during worship, because we neglect to apply it in daily life. We rely on the world’s way to deal with conflict rather than what is taught in Holy Scripture. We gravitate toward simply resolving conflict rather than reconciling relationships through

confession and forgiveness. After all, who wants to confess to one who has offended us? And who wants to forgive someone we want to dislike?

In mediation between two Lutheran pastors, the younger man began to admit his wrong. The senior pastor responded, “Thank you, Jim. I really appreciate you saying that.” The parties looked at their reconciler for a response; he simply shook his head.

The younger man said, “I think he wants us to try it again.” So the associate pastor started again, apologizing for his faults. The senior pastor said, “Jim, I accept your apology. It took a lot of courage for you to say that.” The reconciler simply shook his head.

The senior pastor was exasperated: “What do you expect from us?” The reconciler answered, “When your people confess their sins during worship, do you thank them for their apology and say it took courage to say that?”

The associate pastor began a third time. “I confess that I have sinned against God and you when I . . .” The senior pastor rose up from his chair and came around the table to embrace his brother as he proclaimed forgiveness to him. Finally, they remembered confession and forgiveness!

I wish I could say that this was an unusual situation. But over the years, we frequently experience Christians neglecting to confess or forgive.

Husbands and wives accuse one another and hold grudges. Children disrespect parents, justifying themselves by blaming bad parents. Lay leaders explode with angry comments during congregational meetings. Members and pastors mistrust one another and become embittered because of broken relationships. When attempts are made to resolve conflict, stubborn hearts frequently prevail. But when “apologies” are finally expressed, forgiveness often is absent.

Sadly, this can be true in our conflicts within the Synod as well. Passionate people, intent on their desires, resort to “Old Adam” responses when dealing with disagreements. Occasionally, sinful behavior is

revealed in mailings, e-mails, and Web sites devoted to “fixing” the Synod and those who threaten it, but the authors feel justified because of their righteous causes.

What we profess in the Eighth Commandment, as Luther explains it, is lost in practice: “We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.”

While we have a responsibility to hold one another accountable, Paul instructs how that is to be done: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

Paul also urges, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear . . . Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:29, 30-31).

As God watches how we treat one another in our families, in congregations, in the Synod, and in communities, He grieves at our sinful conduct. After all, we who are forgiven by God ought to be the most forgiving people! And yet, God continues to love us and forgive us for Jesus’ sake. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

David reminds us: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). As children of the heavenly Father, we confess our sins to God in our daily devotions and in worship. We receive his forgiveness in Holy Baptism, through Absolution, and in the very body and blood of His Son received during the Holy Supper.

Confession and forgiveness are not meant solely for Sunday worship but also for daily life. Every day we sin against God and others, and daily we need the gift of forgiveness.

May the love of Christ control us as His forgiven children, “bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col. 3:13).