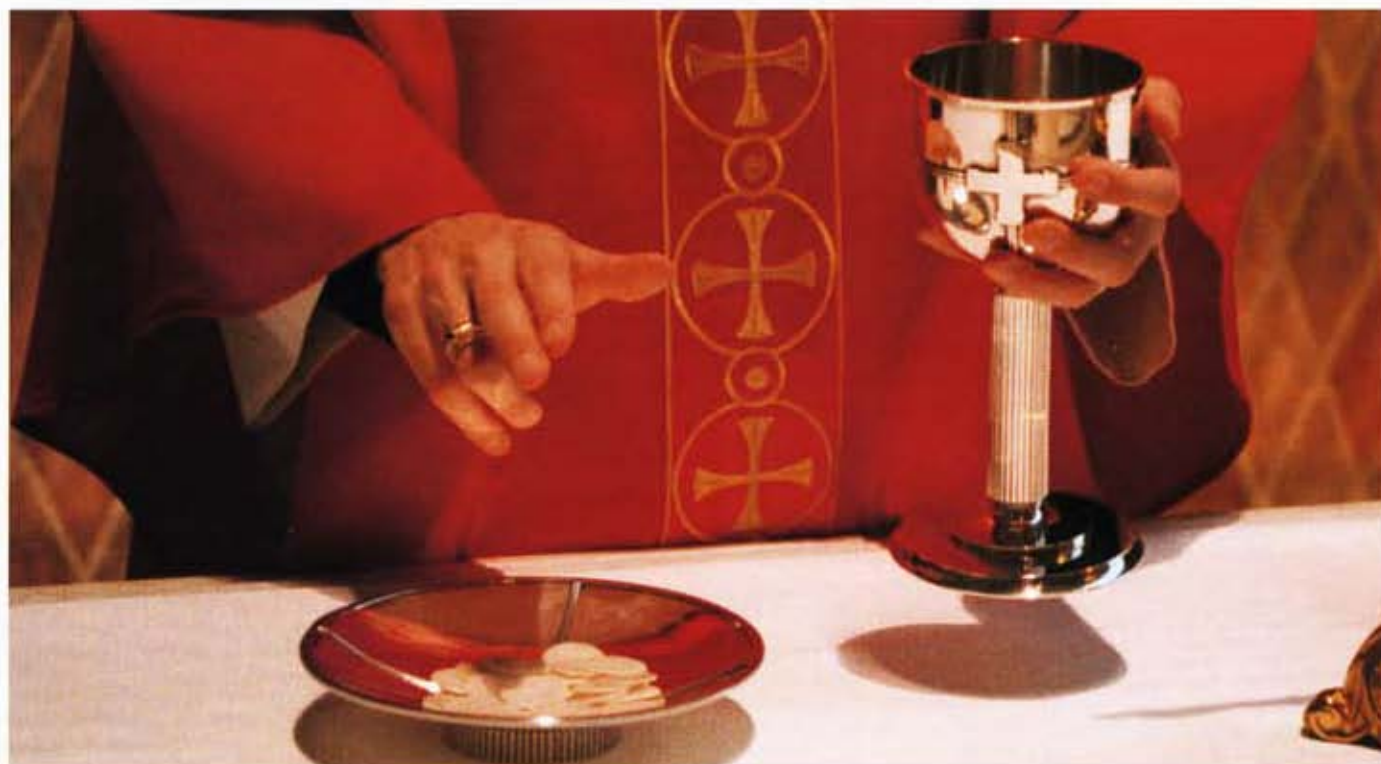


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CONCORDIA
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P R E S S

JESUS



AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

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The central question is, "Who is Jesus? Is He the son of Joseph the carpenter or the Messiah onto whom the Lord's spirit has been poured to proclaim release to the captives?" (Luke 4:16-22). Scribes, Pharisees and the crowds of Jesus' day and of all times are confronted with the proclamation - He is God incarnate and He brings the forgiveness of sins to earth.

And when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And immediately Jesus, perceiving in His spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'? "But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home."

(Mark 2: 5-12: 13)

Those scribes who questioned what Jesus said knew their Bible well. They knew the account of the fall into Sin in Genesis 3. They knew that Sin crouches at the door of every man's tent, ready to pounce on him and enslave him (Gen. 4:7). They had a strong sense of the way in which human misdeed represented unfaith's rebellion against a good and gracious Father—"Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me" (Isaiah 1:2). They understood what Jesus meant when He said that anyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34), and that such slavery to sin entailed bondage to decay, a frustration of the Creator's purpose for life (cf. Romans 8:20-22). They knew of the intense shame connected with bearing such guilt—"My sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3). They knew the helplessness of that sinful state and the deep need for forgiveness—"If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). And they knew that forgiveness of sins belonged only to God and was God's to give—"But there is forgiveness with Thee ..." (Psalm 130:4). And they knew that it was a characteristic of God's heart to be "forgiving and showing mercy" (Micah 7:18). They knew that God had attached His promise to grant forgiveness to the shedding of blood.

But this gracious God, they believed, was in heaven. His forgiving heart was in heaven. Access to the promised forgiveness, for earth dwellers, was at that place—the mercy seat in the temple with its cult of sacrifice—where God had ordained it by His promise. There a High Priest might pray, on the basis of the promise made concerning sacrifice, for the forgiveness of sins. "May God in heaven hear, and look, and forgive." The scribes who heard Jesus' words to the paralytic were simply not prepared to hear a man, on earth, forgive sins by a word.

But there stood Jesus, the man from Nazareth. And He spoke a word—a word which the miracle revealed to be a powerful, performative word of release. When the word of Jesus caused the man's paralyzed legs to be strengthened, so that they fulfilled again the purpose for which they had been created—to carry him around—

it was the reversal of the creation—a frustrating effect of sin. It demonstrated the power of His word to grant release from that bondage to decay, that slavery to sin which was the cause of the paralysis and of every other instance of disease and decay in the creation. That power, the authority to utter a word which only the Creator may rightly utter, the authority to create anew, to forgive sin, Jesus claimed for Himself on earth.

No wonder the scribes were provoked! "Blasphemy!," they said. "Who can forgive sins except God alone?" And, given what they knew and believed, they were quite justified in their charge—unless, of course, Jesus was God come down to earth.

Thus comes to the foreground that which is always the central question: "Who is Jesus? Is He the son of Joseph the carpenter or the Messiah onto whom the Lord's spirit has been poured to proclaim release to the captives?" (Luke 4:16-22). Scribes, Pharisees and the crowds of Jesus' day and of all times are confronted with the proclamation—He is God incarnate and He brings the forgiveness of sins to earth. The responses are twofold—faith or unfaith.

One basis of Jewish unfaith in Jesus' day was the matter of the promised connection of forgiveness to the sacrificial shedding of blood. As the man from Nazareth dealt with the paralytic in the sight of those scribes, there was nothing to show them how His forgiving word was connected to the place and means of expiation of sin ordained by God.

But this Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This Jesus, who speaks this word of forgiveness, is the one who is on the way to the cross. On Calvary, God set Him forth as the mercy seat, the place and sacrificial means of the expiation of sin (Romans 3:25). It is still true that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22). He was raised and exalted to His throne on high only after "having made purification for sins" (Hebrews 1:3). As the Lamb of God on the way to the cross, Jesus has the authority to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." His word is a word of

power—but not apart from the shedding of blood, the sacrifice of His own blood on Calvary, the fulfillment to which all the Old Testament sacrifices had been pointing.

The God Incarnate, after His death and resurrection, ascended again into heaven. But the forgiveness of sins continues to be given on earth. "Peace be with you," said the risen Lord on Easter evening, the peace of the new creation, the peace of conscience of sins forgiven. Then He breathed into them the Holy Spirit and said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:19-23) Thus do Jesus' servants now, in administering Holy Absolution, give on earth the forgiveness of sins even today to penitent believers, who believe that such absolution is "as valid and certain ... as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself" (Small Catechism, V).

Nor is that powerful and performative word of Christ separated, even now, from the blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. For that very blood of the new covenant is present also, for the forgiveness of sins, in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

"The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins." That is as true today as it was on that day that Jesus spoke to the paralytic. It is a forgiveness that is tied to the shedding of blood—Jesus' blood on Calvary, under Pontius Pilate. It is a forgiveness that was accessible, according to God's promise, to penitent believers in the promise in the Old Testament sacrificial system. And it is a forgiveness that is accessible, according to the institution of Christ, to penitent believers now through the Ministry of Holy Absolution and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

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