

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“What is Christianity?” asks the first question in the Synod’s *An Explanation of The Small Catechism*. Often people think that all those questions and answers are part of Luther’s Small Catechism, but they’re not. And when we have our children memorize the Small Catechism, it does not include the hundreds of questions and answers in that *Explanation*.

Nevertheless, this one is not a bad question to ask, and even better to be ready to give an answer in today’s less Christian, more secular culture. One hopes that when people observe the life that Christians live they will see a difference in attitude and action and will ask, “Why?” “Why are you different?” “Why are you so hopeful?” Remember, St. Peter exhorts you always to be “*prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*” (1 Pet. 3:15). And if you say, “Because I’m a Christian,” be ready also to have an answer to the former question, “What is Christianity?”

The *Explanation* answers the question in this way: “Christianity is the life and salvation God has given in and through Jesus Christ.” There’s a lot in that sentence. “Christianity is ... life and salvation”—there is the “*end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls*” (1 Pet. 1:9 KJV). It is “life and salvation God has given”—there is the grace by which we have been saved; there is “*the gift of God*” (Eph. 2:8). It is “life ... God has given in and through Jesus Christ.” There is Jesus as “*the way and the truth and the life*” (John 14:6); “*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12).

Yes, “Christianity is the life and salvation God has given in and through Jesus Christ.” So then, what is Christianity’s, that is, what is the church’s lifeblood? For life is in the blood, as Moses teaches. What is the sap that flows from the root to the branches that gives life? And I submit to you, it’s not the things so many proclaim—themes on the law, things that divert our attention from Jesus and to ourselves, to our own works, to our own righteousness, to our own riches.

No, I submit to you the church’s lifeblood is what we heard as a strong theme in our texts today, namely, the forgiveness of sins. The church, after all, is the body of Christ, and the blood that flows through Christ was given unto death for the forgiveness of sins; indeed, “*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*” (Heb. 9:22). Moses reminds us, too, that it is “*the blood that makes atonement by the life*” (Lev. 17:11).

Thus, the church has been given the command to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins; and the church has been given the keys that includes the

authority to forgive sins. We see that in the verses that we heard last week in Matthew chapter 18, verses that repeat the words that Jesus spoke to Peter, but this time speaking to the whole church: *“Truly, I say to you [all], whatever you [all] bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you [all] loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”* (Matt. 18:18). You remember how 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.”

Of course, this forgiveness doesn’t just come out of nowhere. It comes at a price. Thus, Jesus tells His little parable about forgiveness in today’s Gospel.

*“A king ... wished to settle accounts with his servants.”* And indeed, as we heard in our Epistle, one day *“we will all stand before the judgment seat of God”* and *“each of us will give an account of himself to God.”*

Now a servant owed the king a huge debt, 10,000 talents. How big that is in today’s money, it’s hard to say, but suffice it to say, it was so big he could never pay it back. By law, the king could sell the servant, his wife, his children and all he had, and recover something of the debt. But this is not what the king did. Instead, he forgave the debtor and released him. What grace!

Of course, this servant represents us before God, for whether Jew or Greek, *“all ... are under sin”*; *“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God”* (Rom. 3:9-11). If the Lord kept a record of our sin, our debt, too, would be unpayable. We could not stand before the Lord. “Guilty,” is the expected verdict, punishment the just sentence. But God neither speaks this verdict nor imposes this sentence. Instead, He forgives us debtors and sets us free! What grace!

Of course, the debt does not just go away! Someone has to pay it. And in the parable, the king simply absorbs it himself. For us, too, God Himself takes on the debt we owe and pays it. As the great Lenten hymn puts it, “What punishment so strange is suffered yonder! The Shepherd dies for sheep that love to wander; The master pays the debt His servants owe Him, Who would not know Him.”

The price of this forgiveness is blood. Remember? No forgiveness without the shedding of blood. But not just any blood would do, for the blood to pay the enormous debt of the sins of the world would have to be holy and infinitely precious. The person who could offer His own suffering and death in place of all mankind had to be completely innocent.

The debt could only be carried by God Himself, and so the Son of God came down into our flesh in the form of a servant, perfect, without blemish, so that *“the*

*iniquity of us all*” could be laid on Him (Is. 53:6), and “*like a lamb [He could be] led to the slaughter*” (Is. 53:7). So Jesus did, and by His sacrifice, “*the righteous one ... make[s] many to be accounted righteous.*”

This is what happened by the cross. Jesus set aside “*the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.*” He nailed all our debt to the cross by His suffering and death and stamped it “paid in full” in His blood, forgiving “*us all our trespasses by canceling the ... debt*” (Col. 2:13-15).

Moreover, what Jesus accomplished for mankind by His cross, He gives to each of us by grace through faith. Through baptism, for example, “*having been buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God* (Col. 2:12). Joined now by baptism to Jesus, the forgiveness that comes with His blood now flows through us, through His church. And we are given to forgive. Moreover, as we come to the Sacrament of the Altar today, and eat and drink the body and blood of our Lord, we do it confessing that it is “given and shed for [us] for the forgiveness of sins,” and we are strengthened not only in our faith toward God, but also in our love for one another, strengthened to forgive one another as we have been forgiven.

One simply cannot remain a Christian and remain hard-hearted in unforgiveness. That’s what the second part of Jesus’ parable teaches us. The forgiven servant expressed no understanding of what his master had done for Him. He expressed no gratitude for the grace he had received. He went forth in faithlessness, unattached to Him through whom He was forgiven, unable, therefore, to forgive. So do we show ourselves to be unattached to the body of Christ, branches cut off from the Vine bearing no fruit, if we do not forgive others who sin against us. “Protect us from this, heavenly Father.”

And God grant that we be not stingy with our forgiveness as Peter sought to be, but rather bountiful, not setting bounds on our forgiveness, but expressing the boundless love of God in Christ Jesus who has forgiven all our debts. God grant that we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, and take it to heart, acknowledging that “neither [are we] worthy of the [forgiveness] for which we pray, nor [do we deserve it], but ... that He [grants it] to us by grace,” and praying for God’s strength to help us to “sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.”

For this is the life we live in the body of Christ, being “*kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph. 4:32). For forgiveness is the lifeblood of the church, and we know that where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also “the life and salvation God has given in and through Jesus Christ”; there is the church. God grant it to us, for the sake of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.