

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Holy Trinity, Series B
Saturday, May 29th, 2021
Sunday, May 30th, 2021

Sermon: Unclean Lips
Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8

Focus: The thrice-holy God cleanses us by his Word of absolution.

Function: That they would confess their sins and receive forgiveness in holy absolution.

Structure: “Four Pages” (Law-then-Gospel)

Locus: “Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven” (SC, Confession).

Trouble in the Text

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In today’s Old Testament lesson, we witness the call of Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-8). In the same year that Uzziah, king of Judah, died, Isaiah saw the *true* King—the LORD God, Yahweh—high and lifted up on his heavenly throne. The holy angels hovered around the throne singing the triple *Sancti* (Trisagion): “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3, ESV).¹ The entire Temple shook from the thunderous voices of the seraphim, and smoke filled the room, presumably from the altar of incense offered with the prayers of Israel.

Yet Isaiah’s response to this awe-inspiring vision was not praise but *despair*. “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5).

Now, many of us have longed to see God in his glory. Some of us have even prayed that God would show himself to us as proof of his existence or assurance of his favor. But the Bible

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

teaches that it is *horrifying* to behold the holiness of God with unveiled eyes. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31, NIV). When the prophet Moses asked Yahweh to show him his glory, the LORD demurred:

“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name “The LORD.” And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:19-20).

Nobody can see God’s face and live. Throughout the Old Testament, whenever mere mortals beheld theophanies (appearances of God) or the angel of the LORD, they despaired of their lives. They thought they were done for. Now you know why Isaiah was so troubled—“for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5b).

Unholy sinners cannot stand in the presence of the thrice-holy God (cf. 2 Chron. 23:19). “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...” (Isa. 6:5a). Here the Hebrew word for unclean (**amef;**, *ʾamēf*) means more than just “dirty.” It doesn’t mean that Isaiah had crumbs in the corners of his mouth or needed to brush his teeth. It means that he was ritually, ceremonially, and spiritually unclean.² It’s the same word that lepers cried out to warn others not to come near (Lev. 13:45). **amef;** means that Isaiah’s entire being—mind, body, and soul—was polluted and corrupted by sin. What’s worse, the entire *nation* of Judah was guilty of terrible sin before God. So when Isaiah saw this vision of God’s glory, he felt completely undone.

Trouble in the World

² Cf. Holladay, save **amef;**, 1, “unclean: cry of leper”; 2, “(ritually) unclean.”

Have you ever trembled before God because of your own guilt or shame? Have you ever kept away from church because you felt unworthy to be here? Whether it was one big, hairy, ugly, scandalous sin that everyone else knew about, or just a little “pet” sin that you keep repeating even after you swear you’re done with it. Our sin separates us from God and gets in the way of our relationships with other people too. Like the lepers who cried out, “Unclean!” we are certain that God is pronouncing the same judgment on us.

When I was serving my first parish, I met a man on one of my prayer canvasses who told me, “Preacher, if I set foot in that church, it’s bound to get hit by lightning.” I laughed and told him, “Sir, I can tell you, I have been in that church when it *was* hit by lightning, so if it happens to you, you’ll survive!” (*Aside: For what it’s worth, Epiphany has also been hit by lightning when I was in the building, so I must be something of a “lightning rod!”*) [*Pause for laughter.*]

Or maybe you can relate to this experience. There have been times in my life when I felt such terrible remorse over my sins that I doubted God’s forgiveness. And even after hearing the pastor speak the words of absolution after corporate confession, I didn’t feel any better. In my head I *knew* that I was forgiven; but in my heart I didn’t *feel* forgiven. Maybe God’s grace was for those other people next to me, but not for me. What I’d done was too terrible, too disgusting, too shameful. No matter how many times I said, “I’m sorry,” God could never forgive a sinner like me. Or could he?

Grace in the Text

When the sinful prophet suddenly found himself in the presence of the “holy, holy, holy” Lord (v. 3), he was scared to death (nearly literally!). Isaiah cried out and confessed his sin. “I am a man of unclean lips” (v. 5).

What happened next is utterly astounding. One of the seraphim, those fiery, winged, angelic beings (literally, “the burning ones”), took tongs and removed a hot coal from the altar of incense (Isa. 6:6). He touched the coal to Isaiah’s mouth (*ouch!*) and spoke these words: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (v. 7). In other words, in response to Isaiah’s confession of sin, the angel pronounced *absolution* upon him. That is, he *forgave* his sins!

We usually think of confession and absolution as something instituted by Christ only in the *New Testament*, where he told his disciples: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:23). This is the power of the so-called Office of the Keys, by which the Christian Church on earth forgives and retains sins.

Yet confession and absolution occur throughout the *Old Testament* also, not only in this text, but quite notably, in the story of David and Bathsheba. In 2 Samuel 12, after the prophet Nathan confronted King David over his adulterous affair, David confessed his sin: “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Sam. 12:13a), to which Nathan *immediately* replied, “The LORD has taken *away* your sin. You are not going to die” (v. 13b, NIV).

Do you see how that works?!

Confession: “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Absolution: “The LORD has taken away your sin.”

Confession: “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.”

Absolution: “See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.”

Grace in the World

Scripture teaches that “if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). That is why we have a general confession by the whole congregation at the beginning of each Sunday service:

O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray You of Your boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being” (*LSB*, p. 184).

In other words, together as the people of God, we confess: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a [person] of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...” (Isa. 6:5). Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us! Lord, have mercy upon us!

And then what happens next is utterly astounding. The pastor pronounces holy absolution, and in so doing, delivers to us God’s amazing grace:

“Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen” (*LSB*, p. 185).

In other words, “Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Isa. 6:7). “The LORD has taken away your sin. You shall not die” (2 Sam. 12:13b). And now you are clean, holy, pure, forgiven, and able to stand in the presence of God without fear.

How is any of this possible?! Because by means of his blood, Jesus entered the holy places once and for all, granting us access to God’s throne of grace (cf. Heb. 9:12; 4:16). The blood of Jesus shed on the cross covers all your sin. Because Jesus died and rose again for you, he forgives everything you ever did wrong, as well as the good you failed to do. No sin you

commit is too great to be forgiven—or too small for God to bother with. All is washed away by the blood of Jesus.

In a few moments, we will celebrate the Lord's Supper together. You will come to this altar to eat and to drink the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus. The blood of Jesus will touch your lips. And just as the coal from the altar purified Isaiah and made him clean when it touched *his* lips, so also the blood of Jesus will purify your heart and make you clean before God when you taste it on your tongue and touch it with *your* lips. "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Isa. 6:7). "Depart in peace; your sins are forgiven."

Yet God's gift of holy absolution is available not only in public worship, but in private settings too. Many Lutherans are surprised to learn that Martin Luther and the other reformers did not get rid of private confession when they broke with Rome. Very much to the contrary, the Augsburg Confession states: "Our churches teach that private Absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing all sins is not necessary for Confession" (AC XI, 1).

The difference between Confession in the Roman Catholic Church and Confession in the Lutheran Church, is that Rome turns confession into a good work, while the Lutherans retain it as a means of grace and a Gospel gift. Rome makes private confession compulsory before you can receive Holy Communion. Lutherans offer private confession to help consciences that are weak and burdened by sin, but it's not required. Rome requires an act of penance (or satisfaction) to validate the absolution: so many Our Fathers or Hail Mary's. But there is no penance in the Lutheran Church. Jesus forgave everything fully and freely on the cross. So the wonderful words of absolution have no strings attached. It's all pure Gospel!

Recently, Epiphany's elders asked me to do more teaching about confession and absolution in our congregation, as well as to offer intentional opportunities for people to come for private confession. In the past, I have offered private confession on special holy days, such as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Only one person came. So as of this weekend, I have begun to schedule regular half-hour sessions an hour before weekend worship. These are opportunities for you to come to church before many folks get here to have a one-on-one, face-to-face time for confession and absolution. You can meet in my office or the Sanctuary at 4:00pm on Saturday afternoon or 7:00am on Sunday morning. If neither of those times work for you, you may schedule a time to meet me during the week.

Whether you confess your sins privately in prayer, before the pastor, or in public worship, the promise remains true: if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). And so, I end with the words of absolution:

“Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son Jesus to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen” (LSB, p. 151).

In the name of Jesus, Amen.