

Introduction: Good morning, and welcome to Chapel. My name is Kerry Kuehn; I am a Professor in the Physics Department here at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

Overview: Our chapel theme for this week is “The believer loves the lost—like Christ”. Today, we will focus specifically on the theme of *forgiveness*: welcoming back the lost. But as you will see, I plan to place forgiveness into a broader context involving of three things: *creation*, *forgiveness*, and *suffering*.

For our liturgy, we will be using the order of Morning Chapel (number ten) on page twenty-five in your white service bulletin. Please rise.

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

Amen.

The word is near you;

it is in your mouth and in your heart.

It is with your heart that you believe and are justified,

and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

O Holy Spirit, come to us with your comforting Word, which alone can drive away our doubts. Direct us to our Savior, Jesus, so that we may trust in him with our whole heart.

Amen.

You may be seated.

Chapel talk: The Capacity to Forgive.

We have the capacity, or the ability to create. We have the capacity to forgive. And we have the capacity to suffer. Today, I would like to briefly meditate on each of these.

First, we have the capacity to *create*. We were, after all, created in the image of God. And God made us in such a way that we have this ability, or capacity, to be truly creative. Nonetheless, I think that there is a common *misconception* that tends to obscure a proper understanding of this human capacity to create. This misconception is based on the popular—and erroneous—notion that matter (or atoms, or *stuff*, or whatever you want to call it) is all that truly exists.

This misconception has a label: it is called *materialism*. It implies that somehow, if we could just *quantitatively* measure the material, or the stuff, out of which things were made, then it would provide us with a complete and self-consistent account of everything we see around us.

There is a Christian-sounding version of materialism that goes something like this: God created matter. And matter is all that exists. Therefore man cannot truly create anything. All man does is trivially rearrange the stuff that God has already made. There is quite literally nothing new under the sun. Or so this thinking goes.

In reality, we *do* have the capacity to create new thoughts, new ideas, and new acts that *never existed before*. To illustrate my point, consider a blacksmith working a piece of hot iron. Certainly, the blacksmith did not create the iron itself. And yet, he can work that unformed iron into something that never existed before in the history of the world.

Or consider a musical composer. Certainly the composer did not create the musical notes themselves. Yet she can devise a composition that never existed before and could never have been predicted by the mere existence of musical notes. The musical notes themselves do not actually contain the music. The music is something else. The music is more than the simple notes out of which it was composed.

Or consider a playwright. Certainly, the playwright does not create the letters of the alphabet from which a play was written. Yet the play that he writes is truly something new—a tragedy or a comedy—a work of art that never before existed. The blacksmith and the artist each have the capacity to create, and this capacity to create is reflected in their art. In fact, all of us have the capacity—the ability and the desire—to create.

The downplaying or minimizing of this inherent human capacity to create is particularly muddled when we talk about *procreation*. In fact, we rarely even *talk* about procreation. No: we talk about *reproduction*. That's right: we reproduce; as if we were merely a component of some industrial factory, stamping out new humans according to some pre-existing mold. To put it another way: you create a *creature*, but you produce a *product*. Which do we think we are?

I don't quite know when we stopped talking about *procreation* and started talking about *reproduction*. But I think that it masks the truly creative potential that we have. When we procreate, we really do participate in creating, in some mysterious way, a new immortal soul that is utterly unlike any that had existed before. We humans have the capacity to create.

And yet, we are fallen creatures. Our capacity to create is infected with an unshakable urge to corrupt. We do not only corrupt God's creation. We corrupt our own creations. We corrupt our art and music, making them false and degenerate. We corrupt our inventions, turning them against our neighbors for sport or for spoils. We even seduce and corrupt our selves and those around us.

In short, we are sinners, and our sins are known to our creator: every sinful thought, every sinful word and every sinful act. And as Scripture teaches, our creator will bring everything into judgment: every hidden thought, word and act, whether it is good or evil. This is disquieting. No, this is terrifying.

But you and I know this is not the end of the story. It is not the end of the story because we have the capacity, or the ability, to *forgive*. Think about it this way: just as our *capacity to create* stems from the fact that we were *created* by a *creative* God. So, too, our *capacity to forgive* stems from the fact that we were *forgiven* by a *forgiving* God.

How were we forgiven? You know that: Jesus died for us. And by dying for us, he redeemed us and made us into a royal priesthood, a communion of saints, a Holy Christian Church. And then he gave to His Holy Christian Church the power and the authority to forgive sins.

How does the Church forgive sins? You know that, too: The Church forgives sins by means of the sacraments. That is: when the Church baptizes, she washes away sins. When the Church celebrates the Lord's supper, she distributes the very body and blood of Christ which was shed for the forgiveness of sins. And when the Church hears the confession of a penitent sinner, she has the power to absolve—that is—to forgive sins.

The forgiveness of sins, in fact, is the most important work of the Church. And that is what the Apostle Paul emphasizes in his second letter to the Corinthian congregation. In this letter, Paul refers to a member of the church who had committed some grave sin. I do not know the precise nature of the sin involved—whether it was adultery or some other kind of vile treachery. But it apparently caused such a wound within the community that the church was weighing whether or not to even allow him back into fellowship. At the very least, it is clear that the congregation was exacting some type of discipline on the perpetrator. Paul writes:

If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and to comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

Dealing with sin—whether it is our own or someone else’s— is difficult. But we all have to do it *all the time*. Dealing with sin cannot be simply “outsourced” (so to speak) to someone else—as if certain people are “gospel” people, whose only role is to forgive sin, and other people are “law” people, whose only role is to do the dirty work of dealing with the consequences of sin. No, there is no neat *division of labor* among Christians into “gospel” Christians and “law” Christians. There are just Christians. We all share the gospel, and forgive. And we all must deal with the consequences of sin.

But here we see Paul's pastoral advice. Paul was especially qualified to give advice because he was acutely aware of the fact that forgiveness does not prevent suffering. In fact, Paul's suffering began in earnest only *after* he was forgiven and he began his missionary journeys. This was not unique to Paul. Recall how King David was forgiven for his sin of adultery, yet his beloved child still died and he lived out the rest of his days dealing with the consequences of his sin. Going all the way back to the beginning: recall how Adam and Eve were forgiven for their sin of rebellion against God, yet they were still cast out of the Garden of Eden, never to return.

Yes, Paul was acutely aware that forgiveness does not stop suffering. At least not yet. Nonetheless, he reminds the Corinthians of their most important work: the ministry of reconciliation—the forgiveness of sins. And so he encourages these Christians to forgive the sinner, and to welcome him back into their fellowship.

Why is this important? Because the forgiveness of our sins gives us the *capacity to suffer*. That is: we can suffer without despairing *precisely because* we know and trust a savior who suffered for us and rose from the dead. Think about it this way: just as our *capacity to create* stems from the fact that we have *creator* God; and our *capacity to forgive* stems from the fact that we have a *forgiving* God; so, too, our *capacity to suffer* stems from the fact that we have a savior God who *suffered* for us.

I think it is a common *misconception* that our suffering should—or even must—come *before* we are forgiven. As if our suffering somehow *earns* our forgiveness. This was erroneously taught for many years before the Reformation: that you must work and suffer to satisfy God *before* he will forgive your sins. But this gets things precisely *backwards*.

In reality, our forgiveness *precedes* our suffering. We do not suffer *in order* to earn forgiveness. Rather, forgiveness is, in a sense, a *call to arms*. It steels the heart and prepares us to face suffering without falling into despair. In fact, we rejoice in our suffering. Because suffering provides us with an opportunity to exercise our faith: to do what is right—especially in the face of sin—our own sins, or the sins of others.

So take up your cross and follow Jesus. Because the call to suffer is a *participation in the divine*: to suffer the insults and injuries of this world—even the final insult of death itself— with our eyes fixed on the prize: the salvation of our souls.

Hymn: we join now in hymn 366: Come unto me ye weary.

Please rise for prayer: Heavenly Father, Creator of all things, you give us all that we need for body and life.

Every good and perfect gift comes from you, the Father of Heavenly lights.

Lord Jesus Christ, by your suffering and death you have opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

We approach your throne, O God, with confidence, for mercy and grace in our time of need.

Holy Spirit, counselor and guide, you have raised us from death by your powerful Word.

You, O Spirit of God, have made us. Your breath, almighty One, gave us life.

Lord, fill our hearts with thanksgiving for your mercy and love.

Move us with our hearts to believe and with our mouths to confess your saving name. Amen

Blessing: May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the Sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. **Amen**