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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16A)

August 27, 2017

Text: Matthew 16:13–20

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ demands that His followers make a public confession of faith in who He is. Maybe we aren't used to thinking about our day to day Christian life as being a public confession of faith in Jesus. It's time we recover this prominent, Biblical teaching. Your entire life, all 24 hours per day, is to be a confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Son of God the Father almighty who reveals Himself to us by the grace of the Holy Spirit through His holy Word. How you think, how you feel, how you fulfill your vocations, the music you listen to, the things you watch, how you spend your time and money, where you place your hopes and find your comfort—are to be a confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Today's reading from Matthew 16 provides a glimpse into this requirement that Christians make a good confession of faith even when the situation is inconvenience or possibly dangerous. Matthew records (vs. 13) that Jesus "came into the district of Caesarea Philippi" with His disciples. This geographic setting is not unimportant.

Caesarea Philippi was a Greco-Roman city some 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was a city dedicated to the worship and veneration of Caesar Augustus, the same Caesar that issued the decree of taxation requiring Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to travel to Bethlehem. Herod the Great, the same Herod who tried to kill Jesus when He was an infant, built a temple to pagan worship. His grandson, Philipp II dedicated that temple to the worship of Caesar. Along the way, he renamed the town to Caesarea Philippi in honor of Caesar and himself. This is human pride and idolatry at its worse.

And what does Jesus do in the region of Caesarea Philippi? He asked His disciples a question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (vs. 13). The reports are pretty good. "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (vs. 14). That's high praise indeed! John the Baptist created quite a stir before being beheaded for preaching the truth. Elijah is considered to be the greatest of the miracle working prophets. And Jeremiah...who couldn't admire his courage

and boldness in preaching God's truth, God's judgment, when nobody wanted to hear it. He's the epitome of godly faithfulness under the most trying of circumstances. Jesus, most people think you're in that category of religious leaders. A veritable who's who of faithful and godly men.

What a nice conversation Jesus was having with His disciples. It's all safe and somewhat abstract. What do those people – outsiders, say about "the Son of Man", a mysterious phrase Jesus borrows from the Old Testament. "But who do you say that I am?" (vs. 15). Can you imagine the disciples stopping in their tracks? Or doing a double take? Or maybe raising their eyebrows and lower their heads. No more abstractions. Jesus puts His disciples on the spot.

Peter answers for the entire group. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (vs. 16). Surrounded by paganism and false worship, Peter confesses two things about Jesus. He's the Christ which simply means the "anointed one." He's the Son of the living God. You Jesus are the long expected Messiah anointed by God the Father to be the Savior of the world. You Jesus are more than any of the holy prophets. You are the living God's divine Son!

Those are the kinds of words that could get you into trouble. Thousands of martyrs would suffer and be killed in the Roman Empire over the next few centuries for making a good confession of faith in Jesus. There are many surviving accounts of various early martyrs. Though the circumstances and people described in them are different, a common theme emerges. They all made a confession of faith in Jesus as the anointed Savior of the world. Very often they confessed the same words before Roman magistrates during interrogation, "I am a Christian." Or they would make the great confession from I Corinthians 12:3, "Jesus is Lord."

Such confessions, in many, many cases meant death. For other Christians it meant economic and societal persecution. Men couldn't get jobs to provide for their families. Even when they had money, merchants wouldn't sell to them because they confessed with their words and lives, "I am a Christian." This is the situation being described in Revelation 13 where no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark of the beast (vs. 17). Of course, Revelation 6 had already described the martyrs crying out to God "how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (vs. 10).

It's been fashionable since the late 1800's to speak about the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The Jesus of history is the man who was a traveling preacher, a provincial Jewish rabbi who got into trouble with the authorities and got himself crucified. Then there's the Christ of faith created by the church to be worshipped and adored as a Savior who rose from the dead. This is the Jesus of Time Magazine, the Jesus Seminar, and the History Channel. What such rubbish has allowed people to do is to strip away the need to make a true confession of faith in the Jesus of Nazareth revealed in Holy Scripture. The apostles and saints didn't suffer and die for an idea, or a righteous cause, but for believing that the man Jesus of Nazareth was also the Christ, the Son of the living God.

To this day, people are perfectly comfortable with you saying all kinds of nice things about Jesus. He was a great moral example; an extraordinary teacher; an inspired spiritual thinker high up in the ranks of other spiritual teachers: Buddha, Ghandi, Confucius, the Dalai Lama, etc. It's all good, polite and proper until you say Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Once you confess Him to be divine, trouble starts. For God might require more than mere moral sensibilities and overall niceness.

For us Lutherans who confess the historic, Biblical faith, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one and the same. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. We stake everything on this confession of faith. In Jesus, we find our present comfort and joy as well as our eternal hope and expectation. This confession is given to us, not by our own reason or strength or imagination, but by God the Father Himself. Jesus said to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (vs. 17).

Christian faith and spirituality are nothing short of receiving a divine revelation of who Jesus is. God the Father reveals to us who Jesus is by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such Spirit-inspired revelation comes only through the Biblical Gospel. To this day and until the Last Day, we confess Jesus is Lord; we praise and acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (vs. 18). The confession that Peter made when in the region of Caesarea Philippi is the universal confession of faith upon which Christ's Church is built. We reject utterly the Roman Catholic doctrine that declares Peter to be the rock upon which the Church is built. Likewise, we reject the Protestant/Evangelical version of the church being established on the character of the

current pastor, or the talents of the church staff, or the congregation's programs. Peter isn't nearly strong enough. Just wait till next week to see how quickly and completely Peter fails. No, the Church and her ministry are founded upon an unfailing rock: Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God. We are here today because of this Rock. And the Church will be here until the end of time because of the Rock, Christ Jesus.

To this Church, built upon the Rock, the Lord Jesus, is gifted the keys of the kingdom of heaven, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (vs. 19). In so many ways, this is where the practical, bottom-line importance of the Biblical Gospel is revealed. We poor sinners can know without a doubt that all our sins which cling so tenaciously to us, the judgment we deserve, the hell that is rightly ours, are taken away. Through the Church's ministry of preaching Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, we hear and experience by faith that our sins are forgiven, forever taken away. We learn that Christ Jesus took our judgment and punishment. We see that He suffered our hell. The Church, through her ministers, is commanded to proclaim the loosing of sin, the silencing of judgment, and the shutting of hell for those who repent and believe that Jesus is the Christ. Likewise, the Church, through her ministers, is commanded by Jesus to proclaim that sins are bound, judgment is pronounced, and hell is destined for those who refuse to repent and confess that Jesus is Lord.

Dear saints of God, we are to look for no other confession of faith than the one given to us today in God's Holy Word. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. All that we hope and believe is contained in these God-given words. Under the authority of Jesus, I teach you this Gospel, I proclaim the full forgiveness of sins, I administer Christ's body and blood, and I proclaim judgment to all who refuse to repent and believe in Jesus (Tr 60). By the grace of the Holy Spirit, let us always make the good confession: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In every thought, word, and deed, let them be your guide and strength. In Jesus, death, hell, and the powers of this corrupted world have no dominion over you. Blessed are you, saints of God. For God the Father has revealed to you that Jesus is the Christ, His Son.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.