

Built on “The Christ”

13th Sun. after Pentecost – 08/27/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 16:13-20 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 16, [Peter confesses his faith to Jesus,] **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

v.18, [Jesus responds,] **“...on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

Introduction

✘ At the time of this text, Jesus has been physically with His disciples for over two years. And from the very start of His ministry, it has been Jesus’ goal and desire that they would come to know who He truly is and understand the full depth of His mission.

➔ And there certainly were times when the disciples seemed to “get” who Jesus was. Early on, Nathanael declared Jesus the Son of God, because Jesus told him that He had recognized Nathanael from a far greater distance than any human could (Jn. 1:49). After Jesus’ first miracle – turning water into wine, His disciples believed in Him (Jn. 2:11). And witnessing other miracles, such as the calming of the sea and Jesus walking on water, the disciples worshiped Him saying, “Truly You are the Son of God” (Mt. 14:33).

➔ So they knew He was the “Son of God”, but it’s not until our Gospel Reading today that any human being declared Jesus to be “The Christ”, that is the “Messiah” whom Yahweh promised in the Old Testament would come to be our Savior from sin and hell. And here we see that this crucial proclamation of faith came only in response to a question that Jesus asked: “But who do you say that I am?” (v 15)

✘ Well, my dear Christians, you and I too have heard the Gospel. And by the Holy Spirit’s power we now confess

Jesus as well, don't we? So today we celebrate and lift up this true and foundational confession of God's Holy Christian Church, that Jesus is "The Christ"!

I. The "Son of Man" as more than man

✘ Now the location where this pivotal event took place is Caesarea Philippi; at the farthest reaches of what had been Canaan. Jesus came to this place alone with His disciples, perhaps for the very purpose of revealing only to them at first that He was the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God.

➔ It was a region populated by non-Jews; a place where idol worship ran rampant. Nearby, the town of Paneas, in what is today northwestern Syria, was dedicated to worshipping the Greek god Pan. It was a place of rocky outcrops, caves, and lots of dead idols; a spiritually foreboding place to be sure.

✘ Jesus was wrapping up His Galilean ministry, so the people heard Him speak and saw His miracles, such as the feeding of the 4,000 with just seven loaves of bread and a few small fish only days before. They all wondered and marveled at Jesus.

➔ Certainly, word was out regarding this Galilean teacher. And undoubtedly, the disciples heard what was being said about their Master. So Jesus opens up the conversation with a simple question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (v. 13). "Son of Man" was the way that Jesus commonly referred to Himself because it pointed forward to His eventual suffering and death on the cross in human flesh. Yet it was generally accepted by the Jews that only the promised Messiah would be a Son to God.

✘ So it's interesting that the answers the disciples reported were not necessarily bad, but every one of them was an earthly man. Even King Herod believed that Jesus was John the Baptist raised back from the grave (Mt. 14:1).

Many others believed Jesus was a prophet, descended from the Old Testament prophets, while many believed He was Elijah or Jeremiah back from the dead.

➔ I find it interesting that these people were quick to accept an earthly man who had been miraculously raised from death, but could not take the important step of believing that God's promise could actually come about – sending His own Son here to save us, in flesh and blood.

➔ Still today many people are unable to think of Jesus as anything more than some important religious figure, or a kind of guru or teacher or just as a great example for us to follow.

- ✘ But none of that is enough! Jesus is “The Christ”. At His birth, the angels told the shepherds, “For unto you is born this day ... Christ the Lord” (Lk. 2:11). Yes, Jesus must be confessed to be the Son of God. Why? because Jesus is the Son of God. And His disciples needed to know this without any doubt, so that God's mission could move forward as planned. Their confession had to be clear, so that you and I and all people throughout history could know it; confess it and be saved as God intended, by “The Christ” alone.

II. We confess “The Christ” by the Holy Spirit

- ✘ And so, to get at that most important place with His disciples Jesus shifted the spotlight onto them personally, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). He already knows what they believe, but He needs to hear it come out of their mouths.

➔ Right in line with Peter's bold personality, he quickly replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). Now, it's understood that he speaks here for the other disciples as well.

✘ More than once Peter's impulsive responses came back to bite him. Think of how he came out of the boat in faith and walked on water only to doubt Jesus and begin to sink (Mt. 14:28), or later, during Jesus' passion, how he refused to have Jesus wash his feet, but then quickly tells Jesus to wash his entire body. And of course we remember Peter saying that he will never deny Jesus, yet hours later we hear him fervently deny he ever knew Jesus three times at the high priest's palace.

➔ Well, there's a bit of Peter in all of us, isn't there? And thankfully our Savior is patient and forgiving with us at those times when we fall short.

✘ But in this instance, Peter was not making this confession on His own accord. 1 Corinthians 12:3 tells us that no one is able to say, "Jesus is Lord", except by the Holy Spirit. And Jesus tells Peter in verse 17 that his confession, made on behalf of the Twelve, was revealed to Peter by God the Father through the Holy Spirit. And the blessing of Jesus' words are for you and me today as well, "Blessed are you, ... For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (v. 17).

➔ Yes, you and I have our Father's direct revelation, right there in the pages of Holy Scripture. God's prophets and apostles speak to us every time we open up and read, or hear His Word in the Bible. Undoubtedly Peter had Jesus' words in mind when he wrote about the Bible being inspired in 2 Peter 1:21, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man," he says, "but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit".

✘ In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, Martin Luther says, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel."

➔ Sadly, we Christians too often find this fact hard to accept because, by nature, we want to do something; we want to have a part; we want to take at least some kind of the credit for our salvation. But thankfully we can't! The Holy Spirit must be the One who does it all for us; so that we are able to believe in Jesus as the Christ. And to help us out, He has chosen to use physical and audible means like the preached Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion to give and confirm for us our forgiveness and our faith in Jesus. It is only by His power that any of us are able to confess Jesus to be the Son of the living God.

III. This confession - the Foundation of Christ's Church

✘ And this confession of Peter's; that Jesus, who is both Son of God and Son of Man, is "The Christ", is as Jesus tells us in verse 18, "the rock"; the foundation upon which Jesus built the entire Christian Church; His and only His Church! Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:20 that the Church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" which means that you and I, my dear friends - and our part in Christ's Church, are rooted and established (Col. 2:6-7) only and always in the perfect Word of Christ.

➔ It's pretty cool, actually, how Jesus responded to Peter's confession – calling him by his name and reminding him that Peter, in the Greek, means "rock." But we must understand that it's not the person of Peter, but instead the confession that Peter proclaimed through the Holy Spirit that is rock solid. This Christian church and any and every faithful Christian church must never be founded upon any one person or any group of human beings except for Jesus Christ. He alone is both man and God, and as such only He can be "The Christ" sent to save us all from sin, Satan and death!

✘ In verse 18 Jesus proclaims these often misunderstood words, "...on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." You see, confessing Jesus as the Christ means understanding only His victory and power over death and hell at the cross and empty tomb is what serves as the core belief for His Church in each and every age. And it is that unsurpassed power, given to His one true Church that alone is able to burst through and open wide the gates of hell for all sinners who likewise confess Jesus as "The Christ, the Son of the living God" (v.16), thereby freeing them and us from Satan's grasp to bask in the glory of Jesus and His Kingdom right now today and forever!

➔ All of this leads then to Jesus' promise in verse 19 that He will give the keys to heaven to His Church. And that's exactly what He did when He appeared to His disciples on the night of His resurrection. In John 20:21-23 Jesus appeared in the flesh and "said to them... 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'." Jesus gives those same "keys" to His Church still today. They are the preaching of the Gospel and the proclamation of forgiveness to all who repent, so that heaven might be opened wide to all repentant believers in Christ, and yet still closed to any who refuse to believe in unrepentant sin.

Conclusion

✘ So, what's the point of all of this? That you and I might be filled with great joy and peace and confidence at our spiritual status before God right now and into eternity. Because it is only by Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection three days later, that you and I have been freed from death and hell, as 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

says, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? ... Thanks be to God, [He] gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

➔ With Jesus, the Christ, every one of my enemies and your enemies is overcome. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh certainly try to intimidate us, hoping that we will just give up trying to save ourselves in despair, which is what happens for so many, sadly; to all who are without faith. But Jesus came as the Christ that we might have joy and life; to free us and liberate us and save us once and for all!

✘ And just as He gathered His first disciples in our text and confirmed His gift of faith in their hearts and minds with the rock solid confession of the truth, so He still calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies each of us today by His Holy Spirit and all of us here in His Church, where He washes, feeds, and helps us through this life and into the life to come!

➔ It's not our flesh and blood that has revealed this truth to us, but our God and Father Himself in and through the ministry His saving Gospel that assures us that we are His and we live under Him in His kingdom today and forever. Amen.

Sermon Outline

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Introduction

- ⊗ Jesus’ goal/desire - the disciples would know who He is. (examples – they knew Him as “Son of God”)
 - ➔ This is the 1st time He is confessed as “The Christ” = “Messiah”.
- ⊗ Today we celebrate & lift up this foundational confession of God’s Holy Christian Church; Jesus is “The Christ”!

I. The “Son of Man” as more than man

- ⊗ Background info of the event and place: non-Jews worshiping Greek god Pan & many other dead idols.
- ⊗ Jesus, “Who do people say...the Son of Man is?” (v. 13). All the answers pointed to an earthly man. (examples)
- ⊗ But Jesus is “The Christ” and the Son of God! Disciples needed to know this w/o doubt to move His mission forward.

II. We confess “The Christ” by the Holy Spirit

- ⊗ “...who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). Needs to hear it come from their mouths. Peter’s bold reply, “...the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). He speaks for all.
- ⊗ Peter did not make this confession on His own accord. (1 Cor. 12:3, we only say, “Jesus is Lord” by the Spirit.) v.17, it’s revealed to Peter (& us) by the Father thru the Spirit.

→ We have our Father's direct revelation of the same truth in Scripture. (explained – see also 2 Pet. 1:21)

✘ Luther, "...I cannot by my own reason...believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord...but the Holy Ghost...called me..."

→ We find this hard to accept: we want a part in our salvation. Thankfully we can't! The Holy Spirit does it all for us; using physical/audible means (Word/Sacraments)

III. This confession - the Foundation of Christ's Church

✘ v.18, confessing Jesus as the Christ = "the rock" / foundation upon which Jesus built His Christian Church. (see also Eph. 2:20 & Col. 2:6-7)

→ Jesus reminds him that Peter, in Greek = "rock." But it's about the person but the confession that is rock solid. Only Jesus is "The Christ" - saves from sin, Satan, death!

✘ v.18, "...the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Confessing Jesus as the Christ connects to His power over death/hell that opens hell's gates & frees believers.

→ v.19, Jesus gives the keys to heaven to His Church. Jn. 20:21-23, Jesus gives the "keys" to His Church then & still today. "Keys" = preaching of the Gospel, proclamation of forgiveness; opens heaven to all repentant believers, & closes it to unbelief.

Conclusion

✘ The point? That we are filled w/joy, peace & confidence at our spiritual status before God now & into eternity.

→ 1Cor. 15:55-57, "God gives us the victory thru Jesus."

✘ As He gathered the disciples Jesus He still calls, gathers...us today by His Spirit in His Church wash, feeds, helps us thru this life into the life to come! Amen.

→ Only the Father reveals this to us thru the Gospel & assures us we are His today & forever. Amen.