

Sunday: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: August 23, 2020

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

Title: “The Christ”

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

Please pray with me.

The disciples have been with Jesus for over two years. From the very start of his ministry, it has been the Lord’s desire that they come to know who he is and understand his mission. There are times when the disciples seemed to “get” who Jesus was. Early on, Nathanael declared Jesus the Son of God, simply on the basis of Jesus telling him that he had seen him from a long way off (John 1:49). After Jesus’ first miracle, his disciples believed in him (John 2:11). And seeing 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.” (Matthew 14:33). We watch their growth in “knowing” who Jesus is as they walked the roads of Galilee and saw him minister to the lost sheep of Israel. But it is not until our Gospel lesson for today that a human being declared Jesus to be the Christ. And it came in response to a question Jesus asked: “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

As Jesus is nearing the conclusion of his Galilean ministry, we find him in the region east of Tyre. No longer in Galilee, he is in pagan territory. In the area of Caesarea Philippi. This was a region filled with idol worshipers. The most prominent false god worshiped was Pan, one of the pantheon of Greek gods. Pan was a god of the wild, shepherds and locks, nature and mountain wilds, and rustic music and a companion of nymphs. He had the hind quarters and horns of a goat and the upper body of a man. The region Jesus and the disciples were in, near Caesarea Philippi was a place of rocky outcrops, caves, and dead idols—no doubt, unsettling spiritually foreboding.

In this foreign setting Jesus engages the disciples. These men had been with Jesus for two-and-a-half years. They had interacted with the crowds who heard Jesus proclaim his message of hope. They saw the reactions to the miracles Jesus performed. Jesus begins by asking them who the crowds think he is. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13). Jesus uses his own name for

himself, Son of Man, because he intends to tell them about his passion. It was generally understood, by the Israelites, that the Messiah would be a son to God.

John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets are included in the response. The perceptions of the people are not bad answers. A couple of weeks ago we heard that Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist raised back from the grave. The people thought of Jesus as being in the line of the prophets in the Old Testament. These prophets were among those who had suffered. Jesus hints of the passion could be seen in line with the suffering of these men, or even in line with the beheading of John the Baptist.

Just as it was in Jesus' day, many people today think of our Lord as some important religious figure, or as a kind of guru, or teacher, or as an example. But we know that is not enough! Jesus is the Christ. At his birth, the angels told the shepherds, "For unto you is born this day . . . Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Jesus must be confessed as the Son of God; Jesus is the Son of God. The disciples needed to truly know this fact. The mission could not move forward unless they confessed him as the Christ. We need to know it and confess it as well if we are to be saved.

Jesus follows up his question about who others say that he is, with a question to the disciples intended to flesh out their perception of Jesus. "But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). From the beginning he was leading up to this question. He wants to know what they believe.

Peter boldly replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v 16) as he speaks for all the disciples.

Through the Gospel accounts, we have come to know Peter as being somewhat impetuous. It was Peter who told Jesus to tell him to come out of the boat onto the water and to him (Matthew 14:28). Later during Jesus' passion, Peter refuses to have Jesus wash his feet, but then tells him to wash all of him. Later he says he will never deny Jesus, but soon, at the high priest's palace, he vehemently denies three times that he ever knew Jesus. Next week, Peter will demonstrate he doesn't completely understand the complete meaning of "the Christ", "the Messiah."

As much as we would like to think otherwise, there is a bit of Peter in all of us. Thankfully, our Savior is patient with us and invites us to repent and say we love him.

The inerrant Word of God, the Holy Scriptures reveal to us that no one is able to say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). Jesus establishes that truth as he tells Peter that his confession, made on behalf of the Twelve, comes by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. His words to Peter, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (v 17), are a great blessing to Peter, the twelve and to us.

We have the revelation of Scripture to lead us. The prophets and apostles speak to us through the Bible. Peter must have had these words of Jesus in mind when he wrote about the Bible as being inspired. He says, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit: (2 Peter 1:21).

Luther includes this insight in the explanation of the Third Article. He begins by saying, “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”

There are many Christians who find this hard to say because, by nature, we want to do something for, have a part in, or take some of the credit for our salvation. But we cannot! The Holy Spirit must and does do it for all who believe. By the preached Word and the Sacraments, we have forgiveness and faith in Jesus. By his power, we are able to confess he is the Son of the Living God.

This confession, that Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, is the Christ is foundational to the building of the church. St. Paul tells us that the Church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20). It is in the Word of Christ that we are rooted and established (Colossians 2:6-7).

Jesus responds to Peter’s confession by calling him by his name and reminding him that it means “rock.” Peter speaking for himself and the apostles makes a bold confession that is rock solid. The Church is not founded on any person except Jesus Christ. But this confession that Jesus is the Christ, and by the witness and testimony of the apostles, Jesus builds his Church. Beginning with the Sermon preached on Pentecost, the church was being built on the foundation of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, promised to the world through the prophets of old.

The church spread from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and to the whole world. Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. This promise is good news for us, especially in our current days. The church has always been assaulted by the forces of Satan. In our present day, we are besieged by attacks

against the Scriptures, against our confession of faith, and against the very foundation of the church, Jesus. We are disappointed by declining membership numbers. We struggle with children who abandon the faith and their baptismal vows. We lament the friends and neighbors who wander from the church and find other activities to do on Sunday mornings instead of coming to the House of the Lord. With the reopening of churches in our current pandemic, it is disheartening to see that many people stay away from church out of fear. We hold tightly to Jesus' Gospel promise that the Church will be sustained until he comes again to judge the living and the dead. The church will endure. Christ cannot and will not be driven from the earth. He created it, owns it, died for it, redeemed it, and sustains it. He will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, keep the true church alive through faith in Jesus until our Lord returns.

Jesus also promises that he will give the keys to heaven to the Church. And he did! When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, at night on the first Easter, he "said to them again, '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'" (John 20:21-23). These keys we have received; they are the preaching of the Gospel and the proclamation of forgiveness to all who repent. They open up heaven to repentant sinners, and they bind the unrepentant.

Hell, too, is locked, but in another way. The grave threatens us with death and would hold all who enter it. But its gates cannot hold those who are Christ's. Paul verbalizes our hope in Romans 6:3-4, saying, "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death[.] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). By his death on the cross and his resurrection three days later, Christ has freed us from death and the grave. The saying is true, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? (I Corinthians 15:55).

With Christ, our enemies are overcome. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh threaten us constantly. They would have us give up and despair. The unrepentant remain slaves to sin. Christ has come to free us and liberates us.

Right after our lesson, Jesus will tell his disciples that he must suffer and die. That is why the Son of Man has come into the world. Only the God-man Jesus Christ, is the true Savior of the world. He keeps his promises and fulfills the Old Testament. He suffered and died, shedding his blood so that we might have eternal life.

Just as Jesus gathered his first disciples and showed them the way, he also calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us by his Spirit. He washes, leads, and helps us through life. Flesh and blood have not revealed this to us, but God the Father, by the ministry of the Gospel, has claimed us as his own, calling us to live under him in his kingdom. Amen.