**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Matthew 16: 13-20**

**August 23, 2020**

Several years ago, the Roman Catholic Church came out with a most astounding policy statement. The headline in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch stated it clearly, “*Policy Against Conversion of Jews Divides Catholics.”* Apparently, the American Bishops of the Roman Catholic church have stated that there is no need to evangelize Jews. Not that they don’t want to, but that there is no need. Listen carefully to what these bishops now say they believe, which, by the way, they say is completely consistent with what Rome now believes. Because of *“a deepening appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people together with a recognition of a divinely given mission to Jews to witness to God’s faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.”* It goes on, *“the church now recognizes that Jews are also called by God to prepare the world for God’s kingdom. Their witness to the kingdom must not be curtailed by seeking the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity.”*

Evangelizing Jews is *“no longer theologically necessary.” “Their witness to the kingdom must not be curtailed.”* Think about that statement for a moment. Do you realize what they are saying? Whether or not they realize it, they have just placed salvation by grace through faith on account of Christ on a par with salvation by works. For salvation by works is what the Jewish “*witness”* is all about. The Jewish witness actually denies Jesus as Savior. Furthermore, by saying that God has ordained the Jewish witness and therefore must not be curtailed by a Christian witness, is to make trusting in Christ nothing more than optional. If the Jewish view of salvation by works is to be recognized by Christianity as legitimate, do realize what we are saying about the death of Jesus on the cross? It means that we are saying that Christ died for nothing.

As incredible as this Catholic decision may sound, this is becoming more and more the predominant view within Christianity and not just in regard to Judaism. Societal pressures, particularly post-9/11, are not simply urging, but insisting upon Christianity’s acceptance of other, non-Christian religions, as being just as valid as Christianity. Kenneth Woodward, the religion editor for *Newsweek*, wrote, *“Mere tolerance of other religions is not enough. Even acceptance of other religions as valid paths to God is insufficient. People must develop a deep understanding and appreciation of at least one other religion in addition to their own.”* Evidently, Mr. Woodward believes that in order to *“fit in”* to society, everyone will have to have *“two”* religions. And, as many of you have heard me mention in Adult Bible Class a couple of times, the Rev. Rowan Williams the former Archbishop of Canterbury considered himself to also be a Druid. During his initiation, he offered up prayers to the gods and goddesses of the land and nature. Now keep in mind, this is not some *“Joe Nobody”* pastor of whom no one has ever heard. This is the man who would head of the Anglican Church; the Christian Church of England.

My dear friends in Christ. Without a doubt, we are currently facing a confessional crisis in the church. Jesus, who says quite plainly in John 14:6, *“Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,”* is being made out to be a liar by many in the Christian church. As attempts toward outward unity between various religions are being pushed by society, with the backing of liberal theologians, we are seeing that Jesus, within the church built upon his blood, is being made not “the way” but merely “a way.”

That is why I say that we are facing a confessional crisis. And we in the church have to ask ourselves, on what is the church actually going to be built? Is going to be built upon the confession that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God as Christ himself has revealed it? Or, will the church be built on the ever changing, shifting sands of cultural demands? This is no minor, unimportant question, because as Matthew’s Gospel reveals to us today, there is only one confession which will stand against the gates of hell. All other confessions. . . stand no chance at all.

In our Gospel lesson for today we see what is known as Peter’s great confession. It stands on the heels of Jesus just having had another confrontation with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They came seeking a sign, demanding that Jesus prove himself to be who he said he was. Jesus said that they would receive no sign except that of Jonah. The implication being that just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the great fish and then came forth, so too would Jesus spend three days in the grave and come forth.

Because the religious leaders clearly had no idea who he was, Jesus decided to put the question to his disciples. First, he asked them who the people said that he was. Now, remember, Jesus knew the inner thoughts of all men and so he didn’t need the disciples to tell him what they had overheard from the crowds. He asked for their benefit. You see, all of Judea was *“a buzz”* about who Jesus was. His miracles attested to the fact that he was obviously a man from God, but who? All sorts of wild rumors were flying about. So, the disciples answered Jesus saying, *“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. . .”*

People were speculating. But, were the disciples being influenced by that speculation? Were the disciples being swayed by the culture to believe what the people were believing? That’s what Jesus was after. Jesus wanted to hear their confession in contrast to what the crowds were believing. So, Jesus puts the question to them. *“‘But, what about you?’* he asked. *‘Who do you say that I am?’”* Simon Peter, speaking on behalf of the twelve stands up and gives what is really the most eloquent confession in all of Scripture. *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*

To unpack Peter’s brief confession a bit, he is saying to Jesus*, “You are the long-awaited hope of all people. You are the Savior sent by God. You are God in the flesh who has made dwelling with men. You are the one who will bring us out from under the yoke of bondage to sin. You will free us from being slaves to sin, death and the devil, you will redeem us and you will take us to be your people.”* That is what Peter’s confession means and it is upon this confession that Christ builds his church and no other.

The world in which we live is not that unlike the world faced by the disciples. Many people hold many ideas about Jesus. Many hold Jesus in high regard but fail to see him asPeter confessed him*:* “the Savior, the son of the living God.”Mohatma Ghandi, the civil rights leader for the nation of India during the 1930’s and 40’s*,* once said of Jesus that he was, *“a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies and became a ransom for the world. It was a perfect act.”* As close to the truth as Ghandi came, and as favorable a statement as this is, he still saw Jesus only as a good moral teacher and an example for all to follow.

Bringham Young, one of the founding fathers of Mormonism often refers to Jesus as *“Savior”* but then also wrote, *“There is not a man or woman, who violates the covenants made with their God, that will not be required to pay the debt. The blood of Christ will never wipe that out, your own blood must atone for it.”* Islam calls Jesus the last prophet before Mohammed and hold him in such high regard that each time they say his name they must say, *“Peace be upon him.”* But, for Islam, he is merely a man, an example of one who was obedient to Allah. Yet, if we accept that Hinduism, Mormonism and Islam are legitimate, we are by necessity saying that Christ is illegitimate. For as C.S. Lewis said, “*Jesus is either who he claims to be or he is a madman. There is no middle ground.”*

Our world, our culture is moving in a direction to eliminate any claims to having religious truth. Pressure will continue to be brought to bear on the church, really on us, to deny our confession and join in the pluralistic parade which claims that all roads lead to heaven. They want us to move to the *“middle ground”* claiming that it is the more tolerant and loving thing to do. And, as I have already noted, many in the church have already joined that parade and made Jesus out to be a liar. But, the question of Jesus looms large for each of us today and it is something that each of us much answer: *“But what about you? Who do you say that I am?”* And the answer to that question carries with it eternal consequence, for as I said in the beginning, only one confession, and one only, will stand against the gates of hell. No other confession will stand at all.

If the confession of the church, if your confession, becomes that Jesus is just one way among many, or that he is merely a good example to follow, then not only will that confession never stand against the gates of Hades, but Hades has already overcome it. But if your confession is that of Peter’s, that Jesus is *“the Christ, the Son of the living God,”* then you will not only stand, but you will stand forever and nothing Satan nor any of his minions can throw at you will make you fall. For Jesus is *“the*” Christ, *“the”* Messiah, *“the”* Savior promised by God to be *“the”* way, *“the”* truth and *“the”* life for all men and for all women everywhere. He is *“the”* one, who has redeemed you with mighty acts and arms outstretched. . . outstretched on *“the”* cross constructed by our sins and in his blood and his blood alone, do you find *“the”* forgiveness of your sins.

And for this confession, we are, as Jesus said to Peter, *“blessed.”* We are most blessed indeed for the confession that Jesus is the God-man Savior of the world did not come to us by the fabrications of our own imaginations, but it comes to by our Father in heaven. That each of us here today can stand up and confess Jesus is Savior is a gift from God. It is a gift to be able to stand and to profess the precious name of Jesus, the name above, all names and the name at which every knee shall bow and to proclaim the goodness of God, through Christ Jesus, to all people. For that is really at the heart of our confession.

This is not a matter of *“one-ups-manship”* with the religions of the world. We do not confess Christ alone to prove that we are better. We confess Christ alone for he has had mercy upon us. We confess Christ alone for we are poor sinners, beggars before the throne of God who have been saved. We confess Christ alone for in him alone will all men be saved. And we confess Christ alone, so that all men will be saved. In Jesus’ name. Amen.