

“Confession’s Content”

Matthew 16:13-20
Calvary Lutheran Church
August 23, 2020

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

Our text, this morning’s gospel reading, especially these words: *And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 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.”*

Dear friends in Christ,

The Church is not an institution. It is not made with brick and mortar. As significant as the architectural wonders of today’s mega-Christianity seem to be, or as impressive as the gothic cathedrals of Europe are, or as tall as the church steeples stand across the Fox River, none of that matters to the church of God. For, the Church of God is not built by human hands weathered from labor, but built by the God-Man’s hands, pierced forevermore with the marks of our salvation. Indeed, the Church does not consist of beams and pillars and supports that over time become rusty or rotted or brittle, but rather it is made up of the body of believers that beyond the end of time are robed in white by the blood of their Savior.

Thus, the words of our text are of greatest comfort to us this day, for Christ speaks of us: “On this rock I will build *my church*, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

It ought to be the highest of assurances this side of heaven to be promised that the gates of hell shall never prevail against the church. But, so often, we find so little assurance. Doesn't it always seem that something is prevailing against the church? Science deems spirituality useless; political correctness makes it taboo; the culture deems it out-of-touch; new age philosophies deem it deficient. Yes, who needs hell itself to prevail against it when so much in our world is constantly taking aim?

On the other hand, perhaps it's because we've been buffeted by, yet defended from, such constant attacks that the church, ironically, so often takes Christ's promise for granted...so easily tears the statement in two, separating the promise from its blueprint. In other words, we cling to the words, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it," while tossing aside the blueprint, "On *this* rock I will build my Church."

Indeed, in our sinfulness, we too easily make such a promise that the Church will never crumble into a *carte blanche* to do whatever we desire with it. "Let us change it to meet every whim and fancy," we suggest so casually, "for no matter what we do to it, hell will not prevail." Indeed, we so often desire to build our own little institution, to take the reins and lead this heavenly creature in the direction we want it to go, to compare it to other institutions and the numbers they draw, and the forms they take. But the Church is no institution; it is the mystical body that is the faithful, the numbers of

which only Christ truly knows. And, as the faithful do come together, that mystical body gathers to hear the words and promises of Christ, the body's Head. And, what does He say?: "On this rock, I will build My Church."

The Church is *His*; the body of believers is *His*... and He alone will build her up and sustain her – which means nothing other than save her, daily and richly forgive her, and ultimately deliver her. Amid all the swirling winds of today's culture, winds that claim the Church must be relevant in society, winds that say the Church must "change or die," winds that are as old as the Church herself... amid all these winds, there Christ steadfastly stands; and He silences those winds and storms, and says quietly, but firmly, "*I will build My Church.*"

He builds His Church... but again, such building is not what we think. For Christ does not build a worldly institution, but rather He builds up the body of believers... He builds you up; He strengthens you; He sustains you. And how does He do this? Listen to His words again: "*On this rock, I will build My Church.*"

Now, what is this rock on which Christ builds? The rock is certainly not *men* like Peter or Paul, whose bodies have long since decayed and returned to the dust of the earth. It is certainly not *world philosophies* or *man-made religions* like Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, whose worldly reputations will one day pass away with the world itself. It is certainly not *culture*, with its ever-changing desires

and ever-increasing tolerance for things ungodly. No, this rock is something completely different...

Isaiah 51 says, “Look to the rock from which you were hewn...Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you.” Now, one might argue, “But this can’t be, for time and again, the Jews claimed, ‘We have Abraham as our Father,’ and they were chastised by Christ for such stubbornness.”

But, friends, when the Lord says in Isaiah, “Look to Abraham your father...” He does not mean to the *lineage* of Abraham, but to the *faith* of Abraham. For, as St. Paul says,

“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’... Now it was not written for his sake alone that [righteousness] was imputed to him,” Paul says, “but also for us. It shall be imputed (credited) to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

It is not to the lineage of Abraham that we look, but to the *faith* of Abraham, the *faith* of Peter, the *faith* of the Apostles, (as the letter to the Hebrews says,) it is the *faith* of the great cloud of witnesses to which we ought to look. It is the Faith to which they clung that is the rock on which Christ builds His Church. That is to say, it is not their own personal faith, their own subjective thoughts and pious opinions and burning of the heart, but rather, look to the objective Faith – capital F – the One True Christian Faith they confessed, for “whoever confesses *the Son*,” the apostle John says, “has the Father also.” And again, Jesus says, “He who confesses *Me* before men, I will confess

before my Father in heaven.” And, a third time, St. Paul says, “If you confess with your mouth *Jesus is Lord*, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” ... Saved not because of the act of confessing, but saved because of the *content* of one’s confession. That is the rock on which Christ builds...the content of His Church’s Faith; the content of His Church’s confession.

So, what is the content of your confession? What is it that the Holy Spirit inscribes upon your heart in baptism? What is it that you have been given to believe with that heart and confess with your mouth as *the* one, changeless Truth that prevails against the gates of hell?

Yes, the *content* of our confession is just that important! You see, confession – from the Greek word meaning “same speak” – is not something made up by the Church (which is the body), but something revealed and given it by Christ, who is the head (for, every body depends on the head to feed and govern it). Thus, confession is not something that swells up from our hearts, but something fed to us by Christ, planted in the heart by the Holy Spirit, that we might “same speak,” we might speak the same content, the same Scriptural truth we have been taught, the same treasure of the Gospel that we have been given in the Faith – capital F – of our baptism.

When you were baptized, God breathed into you the breath of Life, and as He did, your new Adam inhaled for the first time...for

the first time, you inhaled God's grace. And, at your baptism, you for the first time exhaled the confession of that grace:

Do you believe in God the Father almighty? *I do.*

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord? *I do.*

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church? *I do.*

Inhale God's grace...exhale confession of that grace. And that pattern continues throughout life... forgiveness of sins is just as true and beneficial and relevant today as it was when you were first baptized "for the forgiveness of sins."

But as you inhale and exhale that forgiveness of sins in Christ Crucified throughout life, you know that there's one crucial element to such spiritual breathing: the quality of air – or in this case, doctrine – that you take in. We're quite aware of the importance of clean, germ-free, virus-free air these days. But, that's true not just for the oxygen we take in, but also for the theology we take in. What is the cleanliness of the doctrine you are taking in?...an important question, considering the purity of the theological air which you inhale determines the cleanliness of the *confession* you exhale: "Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within you." And that *confession* which you exhale reveals the doctrine you have already inhaled; what is the "hope that is within you" other than your ability to come before the Almighty God with penitence and receive not

judgment leading to condemnation but forgiveness leading to eternal life.

And that's why Peter's confession was so important, why your confession is so important: Confession is important because it tells you what you have already inhaled. It tells you whether what you have inhaled is the pure air and doctrine of Scripture, revealed to you by the Father in heaven as it's fed to you through His Word and Sacraments... or whether it is the polluted, virus-stricken, germ-infested philosophies and religions of this world which call for your good works leading to salvation or decisions for Jesus leading to salvation or best life now that leads away from the eager anticipation in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Indeed, confession tells you and all who hear you what the content is that you have taken in. To that end, what *is* the content of Peter's confession in our text? What is the content of the Apostles' or Nicene or Athanasian Creed or even the Creedal hymn we've sung this morning? What is the content of our Lutheran confessions as they "same speak" the words of Scripture?

The content is today what it has always been: "You, [Jesus of Nazareth,] are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Or, as St. Paul put it, "We preach Christ and Him Crucified." *That* is the content of our salvation; that is the content of our confession....

This Jesus whom the crowds knew to be a prophet, a miracle worker, a great teacher...He was, and is, the Christ – the Messiah –

the long-expected Savior who was to come into the world to redeem the world. The Son of the Living God, of the same substance with the Father, yet who humbled Himself to be born of a virgin, humbled Himself in perfect obedience, even unto death upon the cross. He died for your redemption... His hands and feet this very day bear the marks that prove it. He rose for your justification...His baptized children this very day bear the sign of the cross that guarantees it. And, by the completed sacrifice and ongoing and tireless sacraments of our Crucified and Living Lord, His Church has life, and she has it abundantly.

It is this content, this confession, this rock on which Christ builds His Church. He does not build His Church on good works, nor on a moral life, nor on deeds toward your neighbor (though all such holy living does *flow from* faith; but if it *flows from* faith, it cannot be the foundation of faith.) Rather, the foundation of the Church – the crown jewel that has come from heaven – is the incarnate Christ, his work for your redemption, and his free forgiveness bestowed upon you in Word and Sacrament all the Church’s days until He visibly comes again in His glory. On this immovable rock, the Church stands. The confession will never change, the rock will never crumble, and not even Hades itself will ever overcome the body of believers that clings to this Truth: no matter what befalls you this side of heaven, you have forgiveness of sins and, with it, life and salvation as your inheritance the other side of heaven.

“Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Those were the words of Christ to His disciple. And, this day, they are His words to you, from the eldest of our members - “Blessed are you, Gladys and Alice and Don” – to the youngest of our baptized – “Blessed are you, Tessa and Zachary and Emily...for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Indeed, blessed are each and every one of you, for Christ has built you up in the forgiveness and confession of faith that belongs to *all* His saints ...and, against this Church, the gates of hell shall *never* prevail.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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Calvary Lutheran Church
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