



THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand

Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV84)

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

One of the ways I like to get information is by word of mouth. If I am looking for a reliable mechanic, a good place to buy a used car, how to fix a dishwasher, what grocery store is best, what events and sites should I check out, I ask people. When I want to know how people feel about what is going on, I like to ask them instead of relying on what the media says. Because I use word of mouth to obtain advice and form opinions, I have to admit that I am influenced by what people say. Sometimes I don't even know how much I am affected by what other people say. It's a fine line of how much weight do I put on what people say verses trying to look at things objectively.

Jesus knew the power of words and of public opinion. At this point in Jesus' ministry, he's spent about two years or more with his twelve chosen disciples. Today in our Gospel reading, Jesus asks them a question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (verse 13) Maybe Jesus is just curious and wants to gauge public opinion of his ministry or maybe he is asking for another purpose.

Jesus listens as the disciples give all sorts of answers: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (verse 14) Basically, the general consensus of the people was that Jesus was some kind of really important person, you know, like a prophet. But it wasn't quite enough. They weren't ready to take the next step. They weren't ready to say, “You are the Messiah, the Savior. You are God.”

Jesus had a follow-up question for his disciples: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” (verse 15) Jesus doesn't need to ask this question. He knows the hearts of his disciples. But at the same time, he is giving them a chance to distinguish themselves and what they believe about Jesus from the world around them. Before we get to their answer, though, I wonder how we would answer.

What if Jesus was standing before you today and asked you: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (verse 13) How would you respond? Well, Jesus, there are people out there that say you are a religious leader, a symbol of peace and love, a model of perfection and clean living. Some say that you are a complete and total farce. They don't believe for a moment that you are the Son of God. And there are people in the world who call you Savior and friend. They say you are loving, kind, and compassionate, that you defeat all.

“But what about you? Who do you say I am?” (verse 15) How can we answer that question any other way than Peter? “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (verse 16) This confession says so much with a few words. Let's savor Peter's concise confession.

“You are the Christ.” (verse 16) Christ is a term that was given as a title to Jesus back in the Old Testament. It means “Anointed One” or “Chosen One.” The kings of Israel, and sometimes the prophets, were anointed with oil to signify that they were divinely appointed to their positions of power and authority. Jesus is the one chosen to be in a position of power and authority in order to save all humankind. He is the one that was promised to deliver the people not just from their slavery in Egypt, but who would win us away from the devil and his evil forces. He is the chosen one who will bless all nations, the one who will rule over all.

“The Son of the living God.” (verse 16) It is simple yet profound this idea of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Every time we acknowledge Jesus as God's Son, we are acknowledging this unique biblical teaching that God is three persons and yet one God at the same time. He is the Son, but he is also God. The Father did not create the Son, but the Son was there from the beginning. Through him all things were made. He is different from the Father, but he is still God.

“The living God.” (verse 16) God is not dead. Peter confessed it, and we confess it. He is living and active in our world right now. Also, God is the God of the living. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, the prophets of the Old Testament – they are no longer on the earth; they have died. John had been beheaded, but he lives in heaven with God the Father right now. Jeremiah, the prophets – they

too died but are living in paradise with God. Elijah didn't even die but was carried up in a whirlwind. None of these people are truly dead, but all are living because they died believing that God would send the Anointed One, the Christ, to save them, and by that faith God has caused them to live forever with him.

This was Peter's confession, and it is our confession too. With such a confession, Jesus responds, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (verse 18) God builds his followers on this one, same foundation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is not a teaching that some dusty old church thought up thousands of years ago and people are still buying into it today like a bunch of suckers. This is something that is revealed to people only by God. He causes them to believe this message that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, God himself, who saves us from the eternal punishment of our sin. This confession is so strong that the gates of Hades, death, the powers of hell, cannot overpower him. You can picture that solid rock, standing straight and tall, and having the gates of hell smash into it over and over again, but the gates are the things that break, not the rock. No matter how many times they clash, the rock doesn't even chip.

We do not obtain this rock solid confession by listening to people muse about who they think Jesus is. No, as Jesus himself told Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." (verse 17) This kind of confession comes only from God.

Knowing that, let's revisit Jesus' question: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (verse 15) Yes, we answer just like Peter that Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. But does anything else every slip into our confession of Jesus? Are we affected by what the people say the Son of Man is? Maybe even broaden that question and ask yourself, "Are you affected by what people say about God and his Word?" Do their ideas creep in and find a home in you where they don't belong?

For me, it was in a first year class at the Seminary that I realized that I had allowed a certain worldview to permeate into my way of thinking. It was the idea that truth is relative. You probably have even said it yourself, "It's their interpretation." And it makes sense. We interpret paintings, poetry, novels, movie endings, weather patterns, political maneuvers, and so on, according to our outlook, what it means to us. We have come to accept that there is not one way to view a painting or a poem. So, it seemed to go with the flow that we would accept interpreting truth from different angles, that truth would be relative to how you and I see it. Instead of disagreeing, let's just say we are both right. When you buy into this idea of relative truth, then there is no longer anything that is fact, no longer anything that is truth.

And there are other thoughts of people that have affected our way of thinking. How many times have you heard from someone that if God were really so loving he would never send anyone to hell? If God really wanted all of us to be saved and if he really was God, then he would just do that, wouldn't he?

When we start taking in what people say about God and what they think when it's not founded on what God has revealed to us, these ideas and teachings begin to erode our rock solid confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. If we let our thoughts and the thoughts of others trump what God has revealed to us in his Word, then we are letting man tell us who God is and what he does. That is not a rock solid confession that stands up against the gates of Hades. No, that is a faith, a confession, built on crumbling rock which is disintegrating into sand beneath us. If that is the foundation of our church, it falls right along with our ideas.

So, what do we do? We must continually go back to the one person who gives us the rock solid confession – our Father in heaven. When we get our ideas of Jesus, as we listen to the world wax eloquently about who they think he is, we must test it to the revealed Word of God – the Bible. Even what your pastor says, it must always be tested to the Word of God. Because I cannot save you. I cannot overcome the gates of Hades, no matter how truthful or inspiring I sound.

The only thing that does overcome death itself, the gates of Hades, is what God the Father has revealed to you and me. He has made it clear to us that Jesus is the Christ, our Savior, the one appointed to free us from sin and the devil. In fact, because of Christ, he has released us from our sin, he has overcome those evil gates. He has freed us from the punishment that we deserve, from an eternal sentence in hell. With Christ's victory by means of the cross and the empty tomb of Easter, hell could not hold us from him. He has forgiven our sins, and now he commissions us to forgive people's sins as they repent and to confront and point out sins if we see people holding on to teachings revealed by flesh and blood, manmade ideas that are eroding their rock solid confession.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, stand firm on what God has revealed to you, that Jesus is the Christ, your Christ, your anointed, chosen Savior from sin, death, and the devil. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand. Amen.