

CONFESSING CHRIST

Matthew 16:13-20

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The text for today has a lot to teach us concerning worship. And I want to spend most of our time on those things. But I also told you that we would finish walking through the individual parts of the service. So instead of trying to squeeze those into this text, I'll do them now, and then we'll focus on the text.

Last week we made it through confession and absolution, and that doesn't seem very far. But we talked about a lot in those first parts, and we've already covered the Lord's Supper. In the middle elements, we see the centrality of the Word of God. The reading of Scripture and the preaching of the Word of God is the chief part of a worship service. God feeds us through his Word, and it must always have the central place.

I attended a worship service, not too long ago, at another church. It was what you would call a "blended service." They mixed some things from traditional worship in with contemporary worship. So they had a confession of sin, confession of faith, and the Lord's Prayer. They used them in a different way that kind of hurt my brain. But there was one thing I noticed that they did not keep. They never had a Scripture reading. The pastor used Bible verses in his sermon, but he didn't even read a complete passage as his sermon text. And I've heard different people say, coming to a traditional service, after attending contemporary services, that the thing that really caught their attention is that we read the Bible, not just verses, but actual chunks of it. And I think there are contemporary services where they do read chunks of the Bible. But it might just be one passage, and it's very common not to read any. Now I hesitate to say too much about contemporary versus traditional worship. It would probably sound arrogant and self-serving. But I can, without reservation, say this: if you're not reading chunks of the Bible at church, something is wrong. The pastor might talk about the Bible, and he might give his explanation of a certain text, but that's not the same as reading the text. If you don't actually read the text, then you don't know whether or not his explanation is right. The Bible is God's Word, and it has to have the highest place in worship.

We have four readings every Sunday, occasionally more. We usually have a psalm, an Old Testament lesson, an epistle lesson, and a Gospel lesson. We use a lectionary that appoints different lessons for different Sundays. The lectionary is man-made. We don't have to use it. But it's helpful, because it spreads the readings out among different books, and it covers different topics. It protects you from a pastor who has his favorite topics and favorite books. It ensures that you hear from all the different parts of the Bible. It also gives special attention to the life and ministry of Jesus, because we read almost everything in the gospels.

We have Scripture readings right before the confession of faith. There's a reason for this. After hearing the Word of God, we confess back to God, and to one another, what the Scriptures teach us. We confess that the Word of God is true by stating what it has taught us.

I won't go into the content of the creeds; we'll do that another time. But I want to point out a few little things, because it's not just what we do that matters, but also how we do it.

I always introduce the creed the same way. "We join with one another and the whole Church everywhere in confessing our holy faith." When we confess the creed together, we are demonstrating the unity we have in Jesus Christ. And we are even demonstrating our unity with

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Christians in other churches, other places, and other times. We are one in Christ, and we demonstrate it by confessing the same faith with the same words. There's a practical reason for this too. I want you to be able to confess the whole thing, starting with the word "I," instead of coming in a few words later. Usually a pastor starts, "I believe in ..." and then the congregation joins in on, "God the Father Almighty." And that's okay, but maybe you want to start on the first word. I could count off, "One, two, three, I believe in God the Father Almighty." But instead we use an introduction that teaches something about what we're doing. So see if you can catch the cadence of it, and start with the word "I."

Then we sing the "Gloria Patri," which is Latin for, "Glory to the Father." After confessing what God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has done for us, we give glory to him.

We often have special music. This is not a necessary part of worship, but it's good. It is not a performance. It is not for entertainment. But it is a good opportunity to use music that might not work as a congregational song.

The offering is part of worship, so even though we don't pass the plates anymore, we still present the offering. This should remind us that when you tithe, you're not just giving to the congregation. But, more than that, as a congregation, we are giving back to God a portion of what he has entrusted to us. So whether you put a thousand dollars in the plate or one penny, we present it as equal members, and we pray that God would use it for his work.

The pulpit hymn is usually a teaching hymn. It might have more doctrine in it than other hymns. And it probably has a close connection to the text and theme of the sermon.

We usually have a children's sermon. I hope it demonstrates that we are glad children are here. It's not just for children, though. Adults should listen too. And it's not the only part of the service that is for children. The whole service is for children. So we don't send kids to children's church during the sermon. Even if we had the resources and people to do children's church, we wouldn't. This service is for everyone.

Then the sermon. A sermon is not really supposed to be entertaining, though it might be. It's not really supposed to be inspiring, though it might be. But a sermon proclaims the Word of God. It should explain a passage of Scripture and proclaim it. It's more than just teaching. But it should proclaim God's truth to your heart.

The closing hymn might be a hymn of praise. Having heard the grace of God in the sermon, we give thanks to him. Sometimes it stands as the conclusion to the sermon. Or it might be a prayer.

Similar to the confession of faith, praying the Lord's Prayer in unison is another demonstration of our unity with one another and with the whole church everywhere. It's the prayer that Jesus commanded us to pray, so we have confidence that our heavenly Father will answer each petition.

We occasionally use different benedictions. The common one comes from Numbers 6. It's how God commanded Aaron, the priest, to bless the people of Israel. We still use it, because this is still God's will. So the pastor pronounces God's blessing on you. And it's not just hopeful thinking. It's not as if I simply hope God will bless you. But, as you have heard God's Word, it is his will to bless you through that Word.

We sing "Amen" three times. This is a little confession of the Trinity. The word "Amen" does not mean, "It's over." Instead, it means, "This is true." You'll notice in the bulletin that the word "Amen" is always in bold print, including after the invocation, opening prayer, absolution, and the benediction. These are things the congregation does not speak, only the pastor, but you

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do speak the “Amen.” That is, at the end of these things, you confess, “This is true.” That’s what it means when you say, “Amen.” After the benediction you sing, three times, “Amen.”

Then we sing the doxology. After God has served us through his Word and Sacraments, the obvious thing to do is praise him. This would be a weird thing to sing at the beginning of a service. It would still be true. But we don’t praise God for no reason. We don’t praise him just because he commands us to praise him. We praise him because of the great things he has done for us. So at the end of a service, after he has forgiven our sins and taught us his grace, we praise him. We praise him for what he has just done here, and we depart in joy. The end.

The Gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 16, verses 13 through 20. In this ... lesson, ... Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 16, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus’ name.

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, **“But who do you say that I am?”** ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”** ²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Who is Jesus? Who do you say that he is?

I would say this is the million dollar question, but all the dollars in the world cannot buy heaven or the faith that rightly confesses Christ.

Jesus asked his disciples about this. First he was less direct. He started by asking, **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** (16:13). “Son of Man” is a title for the Messiah. It comes from the prophet Daniel (7:13). But Jesus often used this title to speak of himself in the third person. So when Jesus asks this question, he wasn’t really asking, “Who do people say the Messiah is?” Rather, he means, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples gave a little catalog of people’s different opinions. “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah of one of the prophets.” The people didn’t know who, exactly, Jesus was, but they certainly talked about it. When someone shows up healing people, casting out demons, and multiplying food, they start to wonder, “Who is this guy?” They wondered if he was one of these great prophets, back from the dead. But that was a vast underestimation of Jesus.

So Jesus asks more directly, **“But who do you say that I am?”** (16:15). Peter speaks up, and the other disciples might have known the same thing, but Peter is the one who speaks, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). This is a great confession of faith. The word “Christ” means the exact same thing as the Hebrew word “Messiah.” Jesus is the great Messiah that the Jewish people had been waiting for. And there’s more to Peter’s confession. He confessed that Jesus is also “the Son of the living God.”

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And Jesus commended him for it. Jesus makes a little play on words here. Jesus gave Peter his name. His birth name was Simon. But Jesus gave him the name “Peter.” It’s a solid name. It means “rock.” Jesus said, **“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”** (16:18).

Now you might know that our Roman Catholic friends use this verse to support the office of the pope. This is a bit of an aside, but people often ask about it when we read this passage. The Roman Church says that here Jesus appointed Peter as the first pope. It’s a bit of a stretch, though, to conclude that there is supposed to be a whole line of popes continuing Peter’s office. And it doesn’t actually say that Peter is the rock that he would build his church on. He doesn’t say, “On you I will build my church,” but, **“On this rock I will build my church.”** So what is the rock? There are two good possibilities. One is that Jesus was speaking of himself. Elsewhere, Scripture speaks of Jesus as the “cornerstone” (e.g., Matt. 21:42). Peter himself, in his first letter, speaks of Jesus as the cornerstone, and the church being built on him (1 Peter 2:4-8). The other good possibility is that Jesus means that Peter’s confession of him as the Christ is the rock. This also has some scriptural support. The letter to the Ephesians speaks of the church being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (2:20). The apostles and the prophets are foundational in the sense that their words, that is, their confession of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, is the foundation of the Church. And, in this way, Peter is foundational too, along with the other apostles. But it’s his teaching that is foundational, not him as a person. And there is no successive foundation following after him. So the focus of this text should not be on Peter, but on his confession of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

The great promise of Jesus in this passage is that **“the gates of hell will not prevail against [the Church]”** (16:18). So what does that mean? Does it mean that the Church will always exist? Yes. Does it mean that the Church will appear stronger than culture or human institutions? No. Does it mean the Church will always grow? No, at least, not in every place. But she will endure forever. She will exist until the end of the world. And, on that day, she will be vindicated for her confession of Jesus Christ.

In many parts of the world, the Church is growing. But she may be weakening in America. It’s no secret that worship attendance has been declining in America. This has been happening for several decades. The decline among liberal churches has been drastic, catastrophic in many of them. But conservative churches have also been declining. And everyone has an opinion as to why. I do too. Some people say that the church is out of touch with the culture. Culture is changing, and if the Church wants to survive, we need to change with it. I don’t buy this one, because that is exactly what the liberal churches have done, and they’re having the worst of it. They have become the church that the culture wants to exist, but doesn’t care to attend. Others say that our worship is stale or boring. We should try to be more exciting, even entertaining. This solution will pick up attendance numbers, at least for a little while, but only for those churches who do it well. Those that try to be entertaining, but fail, lose their members to the churches that do it better.

A few weeks ago I read an article from the *Atlantic* suggesting that people stop attending church because it doesn’t ask enough of them. It’s too easy. They don’t feel needed. So the solution is to call people to a deeper involvement in the congregation, deeper fellowship with one another, and more committed discipleship to Christ. This one, I think, has some wisdom to it. It actually encourages people to do something good. And people do stay in something if they feel like they belong. And it comes a little bit closer to what I think is the real problem.

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The real problem is pretty easy to figure out. People stop attending church because they just don't think it's worth their time. They might even think it's valuable, but not the most valuable thing, so it can easily be put off for something else.

This is why liberal churches have experienced the biggest decline. They have embraced universalism, the idea that, if there is a hell, there probably aren't many people there, and most or all people go to heaven, regardless of which god they worship. Now, if this is true, then what's the point of church? It certainly would not be necessary. It might be worth your time, but that depends on what else is going on.

We also live in a world where God does not feel as necessary as he once did. That's because we live in a society of prosperity and technology. And this seems to correspond with a decline in faith. Why? Because we don't feel like we need God. We feel like we can keep death at arm's reach. We know that it will get us eventually, but not today. But in previous generations, and in poorer parts of the world, the threat of death was or is much more imminent. And it is still just as imminent, but we don't feel it. That's because we don't have to fight it off every day.

Here's an example: we live in one of the more brutal environments in the world. For four months out of the year, maybe longer, if you slept outside, you would die. But we don't even think about this, because our houses stay warm, almost by themselves. People who lived here before us had to build shelters and fires. Eventually there were coal furnaces. I suppose that made it a lot easier, but they still had to buy, haul, and shovel coal. That was a frequent reminder of what would happen if they ran out. They knew that death is imminent. Today, I have a pipeline that delivers fuel to my house. And my furnace turns on and regulates the temperature all by itself. And the gas company automatically withdraws the funds from my account. I don't have to do anything. The whole system functions, almost autonomously. So there is this daily and imminent threat of death that I don't even think about. You can probably think of more examples like this where prosperity and technology make it feel like death is far away. But it's never true. Death is just as imminent as it always has been. And eternity is infinitely longer than this life. But we rarely feel it, and we rarely think about it. So we don't feel like we need God.

And sin doesn't feel like much of a problem anymore, because people sin, and they don't die. And, most sins, we've talked ourselves out of even calling them sins. So the Church preaches the answer for sin and death, but we don't feel those problems like people used to.

What will break us out of this foolishness? Maybe we need a catastrophe. And perhaps God, in his wisdom, will give us one. But until then, it becomes increasingly difficult to preach eternal life to people who don't feel that death is a personal problem.

So the big churches talk about meeting people's "felt needs." What does that mean? It is what it sounds like. A "felt need" is a need that you feel. If death isn't that big of a problem, then maybe you feel like you need marriage or parenting advice. Maybe you feel like you need more prosperity, because the amount you have now does not satisfy. Maybe you feel like you should be happier. So the big churches attract people by speaking to their felt needs. But to what end? Maybe we give them what they feel like they need. Then they're satisfied, and they might stick around, or they might not. More likely, they don't actually get what they feel like they need, they become disappointed, and they leave. Then we've failed to give them what they thought they needed, and neglected to give them what they actually need. Either way, it's not worth their time. And that's why church attendance is declining. People don't feel like Jesus is necessary, so worship might not be worth their time.

But if this faith that we confess is actually true, if there really is a heaven and a hell, and if Jesus really is the Son of God, and if he really did die and rise again, and if faith in him is really

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the only way to the Father, then church isn't just one good option among many, it's the only option. It's a matter of life and death ... for eternity. And I'm not just talking about one hour on Sunday morning. Our church life should be more than that, because we are the body of Christ. We are intimately joined together. And I also mean a complete life of discipleship, even when you're not here. Daily Scripture reading and prayer. Confessing our sins to God and to one another. Making every effort to supplement our faith with virtue. Loving, serving, and giving to those in need. I mean an entire life of discipleship. And the foundational activity of this life is worship together. It's not because worship is something we have to do for God, but because God serves us here. This is where he ministers to us through his Word and Sacraments. These means create and strengthen our faith. Worship is vital to our souls. It's necessary in the same way that eating is necessary for our bodies. This Christian faith is either true, or it's not. If it's true, then it's worth everything. So worship is either worth your time, regardless of the other options, or it's not. There's one big reason to attend church: because God serves us through his life-giving Word and Sacraments. There are lesser reasons too, and they're good. But that's the big one.

So when churches decline, what should we do? Should we change and give the world what they feel like they need? No. We continue to give a lost and dying world what it needs. We confess Christ. Giving eternal salvation to one soul is worth more than giving a thousand people whatever they think they need.

And we trust Christ's promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against his Church. Our influence on the world will rise and fall. Individual congregations will grow and shrink, grow and shrink, and maybe even close. But Christ's Church will never fall. He will preserve his faithful people. He will protect and shepherd those who seek eternal salvation from him. That's why we come here. That's why this is worth more than anything else in life.

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, suffered and died for sins. He rose again from the dead. He gives eternal life to all who trust in him for forgiveness. And he has called you into his Church. More specifically, he has called you into this congregation, where he nourishes us through his Word and Sacraments, so that we will be preserved in his Church until the Last Day. Then we will experience what all of this is looking forward to: peace, life, fulfillment, joy, and glory forever in God's new creation. May God preserve us until that Day, and may he strengthen this congregation for his service. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.