

14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Matthew 16:13-20
Confess Christ Clearly

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was a time when Christians were persecuted. How could you meet with other Christians without being discovered and reported? How did you know if the person you met on the road was a friend or foe? Believers in the early centuries of Christianity began to use a very simple symbol to identify themselves. Perhaps you would use this symbol on a dusty road when you met someone. You draw a simple arc in the dirt. If the other person completes the symbol with another arc, you are safe. The full picture resembles a fish. These fish symbols are most often found as bumper stickers and jewelry today.

The fish was not just an easy symbol to draw to identify believers and mark a meeting place of believers, it also confessed Christ clearly. For one of the Greek words for fish is *ixthus*. This word has five letters and each confesses something important about Jesus. The first letter is the first letter in the name Jesus. The second letter is the beginning of the word Christ. The third is for God. The fourth for Son and the fifth is for Savior. A simple drawing with two arcs becomes a confession of faith. Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior.

We are also to confess Christ clearly in our world. Listen to the Gospel of Matthew again as we hear Simon Peter's clear confession of Christ.

Matthew 16:13–20 (NIV84)

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.

At the time of Jesus, many did not understand who he is. Even his brothers and his disciples were confused at times. After John the Baptist died, some people began believing that Jesus was John raised back to life. Others saw Jesus' miracles and thought he was the prophet Elijah, for Elijah's time was also a time of many miracles. Still others heard Jesus preach and thought of the memorable way Jeremiah proclaimed God's Word to the people. Opinions about the identity of Jesus were numerous and most of them wrong.

If someone could be convinced about the identity of Jesus by logical argument and evidence, then many more in this world would confess the truth along with Simon Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the

living God.” But logic and evidence only lead to less than full confessions about Jesus. An atheist who admits that a man named Jesus truly existed in 1st century Judea might also admit that this Jesus was a good teacher but that is all. A follower of Islam will confess that Jesus was a prophet, some even saying he was a greater prophet than Mohamed, but they will never confess that Jesus is God’s Son. It is not by logic and evidence that we believe what Peter confessed, but it is a gift, a blessing from God. It is through the gift of faith given by the Holy Spirit who works through the Word of God.

It is important for us to remember how we received the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We did not discover it on our own. We are not superior to someone who does not believe this. Nothing in us made us more worthy of this great confession of faith. It is only because we have been blessed by our Father in heaven that we are able to clearly confess Christ. Therefore, as we talk about Jesus Christ with others who do not yet believe what we believe, let us do our best to be humble and not arrogant. May we not come across to others as being superior or trying to show off our knowledge. Instead let them see what it means to us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and our Savior.

The clear confession of Christ is what our Lord will build his church upon.

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The church is built upon a person but that person is not Peter. Peter was a sinful human who, after this wonderful confession, denied even knowing Jesus three times. The church is built upon Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Savior. The church is built upon this clear confession of Christ’s identity. As members of Christ’s church, as believers in Jesus, we have been given our purpose – to confess Christ clearly. Jesus promises that his church, those who believe that he is the Son of God and Savior, will not be overcome by any forces of evil, not even the powers of hell.

However, when local gatherings of Christians begin to focus on something that is not the primary mission of the church, trouble begins. When the local church becomes more concerned about eliminating all the symptoms of sin in this world instead of confessing that Christ is the eternal solution to sin, that group is in danger. However, it is tempting to want to make everything better on earth. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if there were no more abortions in the world? Of course! Wouldn’t it be wonderful if there was no more poverty or hunger or sickness? Of course! Wouldn’t it be great if hatred and racism and violence and war were ended? Absolutely! Wouldn’t it be great if divorces never happened and children never rebelled against their parents? Sure! The problem is that Jesus never promised us heaven on earth and has not called us to bring heaven to earth.

When the goal of the church or of an individual believer becomes to have heaven on earth, Christ is often left behind. Why do you need Jesus if you can eliminate the curse of sin on this earth? And then when someone fails again and again to make some aspect of life on earth perfect, they may blame God and leave Jesus behind. The goal of a Christian and of a local gathering of Christians on this earth must

remain to confess Christ clearly. Jesus gives his church this calling:

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.

We are to proclaim God's Word, his law that binds an unrepentant sinner under God's judgment. We are to proclaim God's Word, his gospel, that releases the repentant sinner from every punishment due for their sins. This is what we must continue to do as a Christian church. This is what each of you gets to do as an individual Christian. Moms and dads teach their children what God says is right and wrong and most importantly teach about Jesus. He is the Son of God who saved us by forgiving every sin. You get to do this with friends and coworkers and classmates and anyone else the Lord brings into your life. Through your words and actions, tell them clearly who Jesus is and what he has done for you and for them. Maybe this person is struggling in their marriage or job or health. Don't promise that Jesus will fix all of these things for Christ has not promised to fix every consequence of sin in this life. Instead, clearly confess that the Son of the living God became a true human being in order to die to pay for our sins. Jesus has forgiven you and promises eternal life to all who trust in him.

The early Christians lived in a world hostile to the clear confession of Christ. They lived in a world of many gods and many religions, a world of immorality and political intrigue, a world not unlike our world today. Perhaps we can learn something from the first Christians and clearly confess Christ to those in our lives. For when someone believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and their Savior, their lives are changed for all eternity.

Amen.