

August 27, 2017
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)
Matthew 16:13–20

I.N.I.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Richard A. Lammert at Zion Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

Theme: “God Reveals the Truth to Us”

In the name of ✠ Jesus. **Amen.**

Our Gospel reading today begins almost like a report of the results from a modern poll. Who do people say that Jesus Christ is? All we would need to do is add a margin of error and a few percentages, and we have our poll: “Who do people say that Jesus Christ is? With a margin of error of 3%, 27% say the John the Baptist,” and so forth. We would also need to add in the “I don’t know”s, as well as those who, when asked, “Who do say that Jesus Christ is,” responded with “Who?”

Our Lord’s point is not, of course, to mimic modern polls, to show what polls can show us, nor to indicate how wrong polls can be. Jesus’ introductory question is given precisely so that He can follow it up with the *real* question: “But who do *you* say that I am?” The Greek indicates that Jesus is addressing all the disciples; Peter answers for himself and for the others, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus’ response to Peter was, and is, most significant: “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” We consider our Gospel with the theme “God Reveals the Truth to Us.”

Note that I changed slightly what Jesus said. Jesus said, “*My Father* has revealed this to you,” while I said “*God* reveals the truth to us.” There is actually no difference between the two. God the Son, Jesus Christ, speaks only what the Father has given Him to speak. The Holy Spirit leads us into the truth that Jesus spoke.

The Holy Spirit cannot contradict or deny what the Son says; the Son, Jesus, cannot contradict or deny what the Father says. So if the *Father* reveals the truth, then so does the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity is three persons, but unified completely in what they reveal to us. Our God is three in one perfect unity.

What God had revealed to Peter is that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus assured Peter that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him. At this point, you might think that your own experience says otherwise. In the case of most of you, parents or grandparents or siblings have certainly told you about Jesus, and you heard and believed what they spoke.

We all must certainly thank God for godly parents, godly grandparents, godly siblings, godly pastors, and others who have spoken and continue to speak to us the truth about Christianity, the truth about salvation in Jesus Christ. It is, however, only as they spoke the truth that they *themselves* had heard from God that *you* heard and believed the truth.

For flesh and blood cannot of itself speak the truth that God reveals to us. When the Bible speaks of flesh and blood, it is usually talking about sinful human beings, and to see why sinful humans cannot speak truthfully about God, we must return to the Garden of Eden,

God created all things, and gave them to Adam and Eve. He told Adam and Eve: “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food” (Gen. 1:29). “I have *given* you.” God graciously gave to them what they needed.

There was, however, one tree which God did not give them: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’”(Gen. 2:16–17).

God had given Adam and Eve everything but one tree. Satan tempted Eve to eat of that tree. After Eve had listened to and succumbed to the voice of Satan, “when [Eve] saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate” (Gen. 3:6).

She took and ate; God had given to her every other tree, but she took from the *one* tree that had been forbidden her. The sin of desire that Satan had planted in her mind and soul lives on as original sin in every descendant of Adam and Eve: that inborn sin that ignores what God has freely given and would rather take what God has not given, would rather grasp at what it considers its own, would rather appropriate for itself what it sees.

It is not that God does not want mankind to have everlasting life. God had, after all, put also the tree of life in the garden. But He barred the way to the tree after the fall into sin. Why? Listen to God’s own words: “Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—’ therefore . . . at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:22–24).

“Lest he reach out and *take*.” God wants to *give* everlasting life; sinful mankind wants to *take* it, to appropriate it for himself, to earn and hold on to it. So sinful mankind dreams up all sorts of ways to take eternal life. That inborn sin, original sin, ignores what God offers freely and instead of receiving it with joy, prefers rather to take it and earn it by his own efforts. It makes no difference what the list looks like, whether praying enough, or being charitable enough, or considering all living things sacred, or whatever else—it is all an effort to *take* what God offers *freely*.

And that is the opposite of Peter’s confession: “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ (using the Greek word), the Messiah (using the Hebrew word), or the anointed one (using the English phrase). Jesus Christ was the one anointed by God to take all the sin of human flesh and blood upon Himself, and to die for that sin upon the cross of Calvary. Jesus was able to atone for the sins of all mankind because He was the son of God, God in the flesh, divine, and capable of taking on all sins of all mankind of all times.

To confess that is to confess that there is nothing that you and I can do for our

salvation. It has all been done, already, by Jesus Christ. There is nothing left that our sinful flesh and blood can appropriate as its own.

As redeemed sinners, we stand eternally grateful to our God and His Son, Jesus Christ. But we can take no more credit for our confession of Jesus Christ than Peter could. And just take a closer look at Peter. Two Sundays ago, we heard how Peter almost drowned because of his lack of faith when Jesus bid him cross the water to Jesus. Next week, we will hear how Jesus had to say to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan,” when Peter’s lack of faith wanted to stand in the way of Jesus going to the cross to be crucified.

How can such an obviously flawed man be such a great witness of the truth? It is because God has revealed the truth to him, not something he learned on his own. We can take no credit for our own confession. Yesterday each of us were saying, doing, or thinking things that were incompatible with the Christian faith. Tomorrow will be the same. Sound like Peter?

We are all like Peter, sinners redeemed by our Lord. We remain sinners, constantly battling our inborn sin, yet knowing that God forgives us not because of who we are or because of what we have ourselves attained, but because of who God and Jesus Christ are.

We have heard the word of God and we have received the gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ Jesus, the Christ, the son of the living God. We recognize that we are and remain sinners, yet we believe and know that Christ died for *us* and for our salvation. God sent His Son to the cross to die for us, but He did not make that knowledge something for us to find out on our own; He *revealed* to us the purpose of the suffering and death of Jesus, telling us through His word that Jesus’ sacrificial death is for *us*.

Since God reveals the truth about salvation through His word, why does not everyone believe? A better question is, Why does *anyone* believe? The natural inclination of sinful humans is to reject what God wants to give freely and joyfully, desiring rather to grasp and appropriate anything that they think will count toward their salvation. Sinful humans want to depend on themselves, not the revelation of God in His word.

The miracle is that God works through that word to convert us and keep us in the true faith. Many of the readings the last few weeks simply underscore this. Six Sundays ago we heard the parable of the sower; the Sunday after that we heard the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Three Sundays ago we heard Isaiah’s invitation to come and eat without money; two Sundays ago, we heard St. Paul’s words that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

All of these statements just look at our theme, “God Reveals the Truth to Us,” from different directions. God’s word continues to go out; God continues to proclaim His salvation through the Christian church. Some hear, repent of their sin, and believe, for which we and the angels in heaven, as well as God Himself, rejoice.

Some hear and don’t believe. But that does not deny God’s revelation of the truth. God continues to build His church on the confession of Jesus as the Christ, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

If you look around the United States, at our moral conditions, at the number of people—going back to polls—who claim “none” as their religious affiliation, you might wonder about that. It is not difficult, however, to find that God’s word still has effect, and

the gates of hell do not prevail against His church.

One of my privileges and joys at Concordia Theological Seminary is cataloging the books that the Lutheran Heritage Foundation is publishing, now in ninety-six languages. The Lutheran Heritage Foundation has published Luther's Small Catechism in many of those languages. Usually there is on the cover a picture of Luther's seal, or perhaps a picture of Luther. The translation of the Small Catechism into Farsi, or Iranian Persian, has a drawing of a sower, reminding us that it is God's revelation of the truth through His word proclaimed throughout the world that leads people to salvation.

Most Farsi speakers live in Iran, but a sizable number live outside Iran. About 100,000 Farsi speakers live in Germany. Flesh and blood is of little use to them in learning the truth. If they would ask others who have come from Iran, they would undoubtedly hear, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God." If they would ask the citizens of Germany, they would get an even briefer confession, founded upon the secular humanism so prominent in Europe: "There is no God—period."

But God continues to reveal the truth to sinners in need of salvation, and that word of truth works faith in them. Pastor Gottfried Martens is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Steglitz, a neighborhood in southwest Berlin. At the end of last year, he had about 1,500 congregational members of the church, about 1,200 of them speakers of Persian, from Iran or Afghanistan, and converts from Islam to Christianity.

Pastor Martens conducts about 40 or 50 baptisms per month, most of them of Persian-speaking refugees. Don't think that Pastor Martens simply baptizes anyone who comes in the door. He said the following in his Christmas letter last year: "The baptisms were preceded by courses of instruction for which a total of more than 400 candidates came in the first quarter of the year. At the end of a course, each one is examined individually, and whenever I am not convinced that a serious conversion to the Christian faith has taken place, I not seldom put the brakes on the candidate's baptism."

Trinity Lutheran Church is a member of the Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, our sister church in Germany. Bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt of that church said the following about Dr. Martens: "The ministry of Dr. Martens is an amazing blessing for the many refugees from an Islamic background becoming catechized and baptized into the church. It is also a huge blessing for our entire church body, to experience the inherent power of the word of God at work."

Did you hear that last sentence? "The inherent power of the word of God." God continues to reveal the truth to us, and to these Persian-speaking people in Germany, and to many people around the globe. God continues to bring sinners to Himself through the proclamation of that word.

And God continues to feed us with that same revelation of the truth in the body and blood of Jesus, given and shed for you on the cross of Calvary. The word of God, combined with human elements, provides a life-giving food for us repentant, contrite sinners. Come, receive what God has prepared for you through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ. Come, receive what God willingly gives to you for your salvation. Come, receive a foretaste of the heavenly feast.

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**