

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We are Christians and so are obliged to certain actions, one of which is to confess. Jesus said, *“So everyone who acknowledges [that is, whoever confesses] me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven”* (Matt. 10:32-33). Faith expresses itself in confessing.

Confessing is an active thing, though I want to be clear: the mere act of confessing does not save. The Spirit dwelling in a person of faith is the catalyst that moves us to confess Jesus with our mouths.

Believing is different; it happens in the heart, and you can no more will yourself to believe than you can will your heart to beat. Luther teaches: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him” (Small Catechism, 3rd Article of the Creed). Believing is a more passive thing, faith being wrought in us by the Holy Spirit — we confess: “the Holy Spirit” “works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news” (Augsburg Confession, V:2) — so that by this Spirit, we can confess, *“Jesus is Lord”* (1 Cor. 12:3). Paul hints at this as we heard recently from Romans, about believing in your heart but confessing with your mouth (Rom. 10:9).

Paul talks about it again, having talked about Jesus who took on the form of a servant, who humbled Himself to the death of the cross, and who was raised up and exalted by the Father. Jesus did all this, he said, *“so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Phil. 2:10) — the good confession.

For us, the content of this confession should not be difficult. But imagine if you had not been baptized from a little one on. Imagine if you had not been catechized — instructed — in the faith. Imagine if you had not been raised in a family that took you to church. Imagine if you lived in a country where going to church was highly unfavorable, perhaps even dangerous, to you or your family. Imagine if you were not permitted to have and read a Bible, to sing hymns, to recite creeds, to study a catechism, to wear Christian symbolism. How much more difficult it would be to confess! And how often do we take these things for granted, or maybe even despise them! Repent!

And imagine, without the benefit of all these supports, if you were being asked today to answer Jesus’ questions. How much more difficult that might be, as it seemed to be for the Twelve!

In our Gospel today, Jesus and His disciples are in the far north, perhaps some 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, in Caesarea Philippi. There He asked His disciples, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*”

Now this question was not so hard. It only required the disciples to make a report. What were others saying about Jesus? And the answers varied: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, another prophet. But the next question was harder: “*who do you say that I am?*” That required confession.

Now the text gives no indication, but I can imagine it ... a bit of silence after the question ... perhaps disciples looking around at others, or maybe their heads were lowered so that their eyes didn't have to meet Jesus' gaze ... perhaps, like it was for you at school ... remember? If you didn't do your homework and weren't prepared for class? “Please don't call on me! Please, please!”

Peter bailed them all out. He answered for the rest of the disciples: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” What a beautiful confession, and Matthew presents it as perhaps a bit unexpected. Up to this point in Jesus' ministry, Matthew reports only two references to Jesus as the Christ: John the Baptist sent His disciples to Jesus having “*heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ*” (Matt. 11:2), and we heard last week the Canaanite woman call Jesus the “*Son of David*” (Matt. 15:22) — a Messianic reference; but no such confession by the disciples. When Jesus walked to the disciples on the sea, they called Him the “*Son of God*” (Matt. 14:33), but until this point in Jesus' ministry, they had never called Him the “*Christ.*” And given that Jesus told them not to tell anyone, they never called Him Christ again until after the resurrection. But after that they confessed it and preached it loud and clear!

We are asked to do the same thing every Sunday as we gather together. We are invited to answer Jesus' question: “*Who do you say that I am?*” And we do. We answer it here mostly with the Nicene Creed, but sometimes also the Apostles' Creed or Athanasian Creed. And they all speak with one voice, united with Peter and the apostles: I believe “in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God,” or I believe “in Jesus Christ, His [the Father's] only Son, our Lord,” or “we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at the same time both God and man.”

These creeds have been handed over to us by the Church. They present to us “*the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3), the apostolic faith, and they arm you with words, not just to confess Jesus before those of us in our own congregation, or in our families, but before the world.

I tell this story in my catechesis classes — both to young and old, but it bears repeating here for many in our world today simply don't know who Christians are or what the Church teaches. I tell it to encourage them “*be ready always to give an*

answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15 KJV). The creeds help us do that. Thus, I teach the catechumens to have especially the Apostles’ Creed at the ready when someone asks you what it means to be a Christian.

In western Missouri, Lutherans are not as prevalent as they are in St. Louis to the east or here in Fort Wayne. When I was in Clinton, Missouri, one of my catechumens attended a “Christian” school in Lowry City, Missouri. Her classmates didn’t know much about Lutherans, and one even asked my member, “Who are Lutherans? Are they Christian? What do you believe?” Without missing a beat, she started to confess the faith using the framework of the Apostles’ Creed. It was beautiful. It was Trinitarian — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She confessed Jesus as the Christ, the eternal Son of God, born of a virgin, true God and true Man. She confessed Jesus who suffered and died for her, for her sins, and rose again from the dead to open heaven to her, and so forth, as we’ll hear more about in next Sunday’s Gospel. I was proud of her; she confessed Jesus before this boy.

Well, the young man was flabbergasted. He knew that she was definitely Christian and so are Lutherans. And she put him to shame for he realized that he could not confess the faith as this young Lutheran just did — as we all should be ready and able to do, for we have the benefits that the disciples did not have. We have their enduring testimony. We are part of the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church, and that church has been built and continues to be *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone”* (Eph. 2:20).

Indeed, this we also confess, that this one Church is not built on simply a man, not even one to whom Jesus’ true identity was revealed by the Father. To be sure, Peter was named Πέτρος, the Rock, for his confession, but he is not the πέτρα, the rock on which Jesus builds His Church. He is not “the ‘rock’ of [the Lord’s] church” as Rome puts it (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 881). Rather, as Paul said above the Church is built on Christ the cornerstone. And Peter, too, confesses that Christ, *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”* (1 Pet. 2:7).

That’s not to say that Peter is unimportant — or his testimony. Indeed, we hold on to his testimony of Christ and build yet on this foundation. In fact, we confess that the church “has been built upon the ministry of the confession Peter made, in which he proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God [Matthew 16:16]. Therefore, Christ addresses Peter as a minister, ‘On this rock,’ that is, this ministry. <Therefore, He addresses him as a minister of this office in which this confession, and doctrine is to be in operation and says: ‘Upon this rock,’ i.e., this preaching and preaching office.>” (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 25)

Yes, the Church continues to be built, not on Peter Himself, but on the confession and ministry that Peter bequeathed to us. Today pastors and teachers

still proclaim Jesus is the Christ; He is our Lord; He is the Son of the Living God; He is a living Stone, rejected by men, but chosen and precious before God who raised Him from the dead. And we as living stones, hewn from the quarry of this confession, are built into a spiritual house on Christ who is our Rock (1 Pet. 2:4-5).

Dear saints, as you go forth into the world and show yourselves to be Christians, it's more and more likely that you will be asked what you believe. What do you confess? Be bold. Be specific. It's not just that you believe in some generic, ethereal God. You believe in Jesus Christ, true God, come in our flesh, born of the Virgin. Confess it! Confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Confess Christ crucified for you. Confess Christ, whose name you bear, on whom you have been built, by whose blood you are forgiven and saved, the God in whom you hope. Let us not only hold fast this confession, but let us also confess it boldly before men trusting Jesus' promise: "*the gates of hell shall not prevail against [His church].*"

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.