

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Being a Christian presupposes confession. We highlight it especially for those who are being confirmed. Quoting Jesus, we say, “*Whoever confesses Me before men, I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 10:32 NKJV).

We’re not talking here about confessing sins (although Christians are called to confess those, too). We’re talking about confessing the faith, like the disciples were called upon to do in our Gospel today. The easy question was: “*Who do people say that I am?*” It simply required a report, and the answers varied: “*John the Baptist ... Elijah ... one of the prophets.*” The hard question, the question that required confession, was: “*Who do you say that I am?*” That question required some introspection. “What do you believe concerning me?” Jesus asked them. Answering for the disciples, Peter confessed correctly: “*You are the Christ.*”

Being a Christian presupposes confession. Of course, you won’t get asked that question — the one Jesus asked the disciples, at least, not in the same way. More likely, you’ll get asked something like this: “You’re a Christian. What do Christians believe?” There’s your chance! Remember, Peter calls all of us to readiness to answer this question: “*always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; [and] do it with gentleness and respect*” (1 Pet. 3:15).

So what do you say? The nice thing is that you don’t have to figure it out as Peter did. You can use the things that have been handed down to you, in particular, the creeds — the Nicene Creed, the Apostles’ Creed. These are the Church’s confessions; these are your confessions. You have been taught them and you confess at least one of them weekly, maybe more often than that.

What do Christians believe? Following the creeds, we believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the creator of all things — you see you don’t have to recite the creed but use it as an outline — and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Father’s only Son, our Savior, and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became man by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and who was crucified for us, died, but rose again from the dead. We believe in the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith in Jesus, and gives us life.

Or, if you’d rather, you can use something like the Augsburg Confession as an outline. It also affirms what we Christians believe. You can call it a creed. It begins with the Holy Trinity, then talks about the problem of sin, and then God’s remedy for sin, namely Jesus, God’s Son, and His death and resurrection. These objective “*things of God*” are the very things that Jesus in our Gospel lesson foretold would happen to Him, so that by “His death, Christ [might make] satisfaction for our sins,” so that by

this sacrifice our “sins [might be] forgiven for Christ’s sake” (Augsburg Confession, IV:2). This is Christ’s objective work for us: dying for us sinners, declaring us righteous by His blood, reconciling God’s enemies by His death, saving us by His life.

Jesus doesn’t talk about the significance here, but this is what He is about to do by His death: “*to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45). St. Paul says it this way in the verse before our Epistle: Jesus “*was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*” (Rom. 4:25).

This justification is an objective fact, a result of Christ’s atoning sacrifice for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). This is the faith we confess, the so-called *fides quae creditur*, the content of the faith. That’s what Peter was confessing, too — Jesus is the Christ; and Jesus added some content to that creed — He would suffer, and be rejected, and die, and rise again after three days. By these Jesus has justified the world.

But we also confess that this justification is received only by faith, even as Moses wrote of Abraham, that “*he believed the LORD, and [the LORD] counted it to him as righteousness*” (Gen. 15:6). Again, right before our Epistle, Paul preaches, “*the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for [Abraham’s] sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us — righteousness will be counted to us — who believe in*” Christ Jesus crucified and raised from the dead (Rom. 4:23-24).

So again, we confess in the Augsburg Confession: “People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. . . . God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight” (AC IV:2-3). This faith is called the *fides qua creditur*, the faith that is in the heart — a trust in God’s word and promises, as Abraham believed the LORD.

This is the way each of us receives the fruit of Jesus’ justifying act — by faith. We are washed by water and the Word; the Holy Spirit is poured out richly on us; He creates faith in us; we are recreated and renewed; we are “*justified by his grace,*” and made “*heirs according to the hope of eternal life*” (Titus 3:5-7). Or we hear God’s word preached to us, and the Holy Spirit moves us to believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths, for “*with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved,*” and “*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:10, 17).

It all sounds wonderful! And it is . . . in Christ. And it is . . . ultimately, when “*the Son of Man . . . comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*” on the last day. But Jesus also reminds us that “*In the world you will have tribulation*” (John 16:33). And so Jesus says to the crowd, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*”

This also is the radical message of Christianity, that Christians are not promised a life of ease in this world. Rather Christians are called to a life of self-denial and cross-bearing. Christian faith is a call to lose one's life for the sake of Jesus and His Gospel. That could mean suffering, after all, Abraham suffered. He was given the promise of a son, probably at age 85, and he would have to wait until he was 99 before his wife, Sarah, would become pregnant — 100 when Sarah would finally give birth to Isaac.

Paul suffered, too — imprisonments, beatings, a stoning, shipwrecked, adrift at sea, *“in hunger and thirst,” “in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from [his] own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers”* (2 Cor. 11:23-27), and yet after all that, out of his trust in Christ, he could write, *“we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*

Faith — that is, following Jesus — doesn't promise material prosperity. It doesn't promise robust health. Indeed, what good is all that, Jesus asks, if you forfeit your soul for eternity? Surely you can work hard; earn a good living — man's things, but don't do it at the expense of neglecting that which strengthens your faith — God's things. Similarly, take care of yourself in your body — especially for us still in this time of pandemic — but don't neglect the soul. For the promise of faith extends beyond this world to the next, and that is God's gift to us of immeasurable worth. As St. Paul says, *“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”* (Phil. 3:8-9).

Therefore, let us consider this gift of faith, given us by God through His gifts of Word and Sacrament, and let us rejoice in the *“grace in which we stand.”* Let us take to heart again the confirmation promises that we made “to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death” by hearing “the Word of God” and receiving “the Lord's Supper faithfully,” and “to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.” God grant it, we pray, as we did when we were confirmed, “by the grace of God” (Rite of Confirmation, *Lutheran Service Book*).

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