

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The service propers for today point us especially to Jesus' exhortation at the end of the Gospel: "*So everyone who acknowledges 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.*" Although "acknowledge" is okay as a translation of ὁμολογέω, it means "to agree to a thing," to "admit," to "confess" (Liddell/Scott). After all, what does it mean to acknowledge Jesus? The Arians acknowledged Jesus, but in a heretical way. But to confess Him is to say of Jesus what He says of Himself, what the Scriptures say of Him.

That's what we're given to do. That's what we pray for, that the name of God "may be kept holy among us also." And how is this done? We answer in the Catechism: "God's name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it." And we pray: "Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, First Petition) Help us to do this, for there are forces arrayed against us — the devil ... the world — trying to keep us from this confession and faith.

But we Lutherans have a legacy of confessing Jesus and proclaiming the Word of God in its truth and purity. We have the example of Luther himself. You know the story ... how Luther stood at the Diet of Worms before Emperor Charles of the Holy Roman Empire, going before "*governors and kings*" as Jesus said a few verses earlier. You know how, with his life on the line, Luther bore "*witness before them*" (Matt. 10:18); he confessed: "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen" (*Luther's Works*, 32:112-3).

Our legacy is more than Luther. We have the example of Lutheran princes — laymen — confessing the faith, not conceding anything, but ready to lay down their lives for the truth that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, not by our works. At the Diet at Speyer in 1529, these princes protested Emperor Charles' oppressive edicts regarding their confession. It was here that the term "protestant" was coined.

And we remember our legacy of confessing today, 493 years after the Lutheran Confession called the Augsburg Confession was presented before Charles V in the city of Augsburg, June 25, 1530. And this is no mere historical relic. You should read it, if you haven't. This is our confession to this day. This is how we confess God, man and sin, Jesus, justification, the ministry, good works, the Church, the Sacraments, etc. Yes, we here are Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

So, we'll translate Jesus' words today: *"Therefore, all who CONFESS me before men, I also will CONFESS before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."*

And Jesus is speaking to all of us, though as you heard last Sunday that this text comes from Jesus' Missionary Discourse. Concordia Seminary Professor Jeff Gibbs says this portion of that discourse "has a more inclusive and general tone to its language that makes it more applicable to the apostolic church's later outreach to both Jews and Gentiles" (Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1–11:1*, p. 502). It has "broader application"; it "applies ... also ... to all who face persecution for the sake of Christ's mission" (p. 503).

Indeed, Jesus informs us that life in the Church is not going to be easy. There will be betrayal. Our ESV translates it: *"Brother will DELIVER brother over to death,"* but it could just as easily have translated it *"Brother will BETRAY brother unto death."* It's the same word that is used for Judas' betrayal of Jesus (see Matt. 26:16, 21, 23-25). Likewise, parents and children will betray one another unto death because of Jesus. *"[Y]ou will be hated by all for my name's sake,"* Jesus says, just because you are a Christian. You will be persecuted. Jesus doesn't say "if they persecute you," but *"When they persecute you."* And when they do, He says, *"flee."*

Like your teacher, like your master, like your Lord, they will malign you and call you names. They called Jesus *"Beelzebul"*; what do they call us? "Hater," "fascist," "Christian nationalist," etc.

Now, nobody likes it when people say evil things against you; nobody likes to be called names. But you know that they do it to shut you up. Two quick examples.

The first was over in England. I wrote about it in February. A woman named Isabel was arrested for praying outside an abortion clinic in Birmingham. She was later released, but then arrested again. And she didn't even say anything. Her prayer was a silent one! ("Stand with Isabel," adlegal.org)

The second happened here in the US only a couple weeks ago. A street preacher in a public space in Reading, PA, but at a gay pride event, was arrested for shouting passages from the Bible. Allegedly, he was arrested for disorderly conduct, but the video showed that to be false. It was clear that that accusation was merely pretext. The charges were quickly dropped: "we did not believe we could prove a criminal case of disorderly conduct," the DA said (Isabel Keane, "Street preacher arrested after quoting scripture at Pa. Pride flag event sees charges dropped," *New York Post*, June 11, 2023). Of course, not! That police officer knew it, too; he just wanted to shut that man up and, maybe, deter him from being so bold as to try it again.

I hope they won't be successful in silencing him, even though I may disagree with his methodology. And I suspect that he holds to a false "decision theology" since he was wearing "a T-shirt that said, 'You must be born again.'" Nevertheless, I think we should support his right to speak out. Otherwise, we are back in a situation like that spoken of by German Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemöller during WWII. He wrote this poem, "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me" (Wikipedia on Martin Niemöller).

Moreover, let us not be silenced. Cast off your fear, Jesus says. He says it several times! "*Have no fear.*" Don't hide in the darkness, but "*What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.*"

"[D]o not fear." The enemies of Christ and of His Church may be able to "*kill the body but [they] cannot kill the soul.*" But let us listen to God who "*can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" Let us follow Christ; fear Him; confess Him, lest in denying Him, He deny you before the Father in heaven, and you are cast into the lake of fire and sulphur with "*the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, ... [with] murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars*" (Rev. 21:8), an eternal destruction in everlasting torment.

But, "*fear not*" Jesus says, for God has no desire for this doom for us. He takes "*no pleasure in the death of anyone*" (Ezek. 18:32). He wants us to live; He wants our salvation; He wants us to live in the truth; He wants us to lead godly, quiet, peaceable, dignified lives (1 Tim. 2:2-4) — without fear. He loves us. He watches over us and cares for us. We are of great value to Him — more than a sparrow; more than anything. That's why the Father sent Jesus into our flesh ... not into the flesh of a sparrow, not into the flesh of your dog or cat, nor of any other creature, but into ours. That's why the Father gave Jesus up unto the death of a cross and raised Him back up. That's why repentance for the forgiveness of sins is preached in the Christian Church to this day. That's why Jesus is preached ... that we might hear with our ears and believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord, that we might be acknowledged before God the Father in heaven, that we might be saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

On the other hand, there are lots of ways to deny Jesus, with our mouths and with our lives. Rather than keeping God's name holy, we profane it by teaching or confessing contrary to God's word, by despising "preaching and His word", by not holding "it sacred and gladly [hearing] and [learning] it." And by living contrary to

God's word, rejecting Jesus, living dissolute, degenerate lives untethered to God's law and will, living unresponsive to God's command to love.

And so we pray, "Protect us from this, heavenly Father." In failure, we repent and are forgiven. And we pray that our dear Father in heaven would help us to follow His word boldly, confess His Son in firm faith, and live holy lives of love toward one another ... as we have been taught, as we have been shown by our Lutheran forebears. God grant it ...

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