

1 September 2002  
Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Alexandria, VA

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“When the Great Confession Meets Life”

Text: Matthew 16:21-26

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last Sunday we heard the great confession of the Church, first uttered by Peter, **“*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”** And I spent a good deal of time considering that confession in the sermon last week – not because what I said was so different, or because you had not heard it before – but because of what we heard today. For the Holy Gospel that we heard today shows us what happens when this confession of ours meets life. Or maybe I should say crashes into our life.

For consider Peter. Last week we heard him make this great confession. But does he realize what this confession means? Does he realize what it will mean for him? The answer is no. Because when his confession crashes into his life, he fails. For today we heard Jesus explain to His disciples exactly what this confession means. What this confession means for His life and for ours. For if Jesus is **“*the Christ, the Son of the living God,*”** then as we heard and as Jesus is teaching here, **“*He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed.*”** . . . And suddenly, with those words, something happens to Peter’s great confession! When it crashes into his life, it fails! For when he hears Jesus say these things, he takes Jesus aside and says to Him, **“*Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.*”** But it will happen. Because this is what this great confession means. Because of who He is, Jesus will be rejected. Because of who He is, Jesus will be slaughtered. But for Peter, when this confession crashes into his life, when he finds out what it means for his life, when it moves from theory to reality . . . he fails. And Jesus has to rebuke him with some of the harshest words, **“*Get behind me, Satan!*”**

But this is not the only time that Peter has a problem with his confession and what happens when it crashes into his life. It happened again in the Garden of Gethsemane. When the soldiers and Jewish officials come to arrest Jesus and bring to conclusion what Jesus has said must happen, Peter reverts to the power of the sword, slicing the ear of the servant of the High Priest. And then shortly after that, when Jesus is on trial and Peter has an opportunity to confess His Lord to those around him, he . . . he cannot. He denies. He fails. . . . He knows! He knows that Jesus is **“*the Christ, the Son of the living God,*”** but when

that confession crashes into his life . . .

And don't we too have the same problem? We know. We confess the creeds here in church. We believe and trust in our Saviour Jesus Christ, that He is "***the Christ, the Son of the living God,***" . . . but what happens when that confession crashes into our life? When we are called upon to confess Him to an unbelieving and hostile world? What happens when what we believe is about to have an effect on our lives, on how we live, on what we do? When our confession crashes into our life, it is not always an easy thing. In fact, it is often a very hard thing! And we must admit, often times, like Peter, we fail.

Why is this? Perhaps the answer lies for us in the meaning of the actual word for witness, or testify. The word for that in the original Greek is the word μαρτυρέω – and you can hear in that word the word *martyr*. And that is no accident! For to be a martyr is to die for your confession, for your testimony, for your faith. And so perhaps the reason why our testimony and witness and confession are weak, why they fail when our confession crashes into our lives is because we are unwilling to be martyrs. For the truth is, when your confession crashes into your life, either your confession gives way or your life gives way.

And isn't this what we see with Peter? Isn't this what Peter had to learn? When Jesus confronts him with death and the cross, when in the Garden of Gethsemane he is confronted with violence and death, when in the courtyard of the High Priest he is confronted with his own death . . . something has to give. And what gives is his confession. He denies. He fails. He runs away. He is not willing to see Jesus die, or die himself. He doesn't want to see death, but he does. He sees the cross. Head on!

And again, isn't this what we see in our own lives? Isn't this why our confession fails too? Because we are scared, because we have fears and doubts and uncertainty. Because people don't like our confession, and its exclusiveness is not welcomed or popular in our tolerant world today. Because it is inconvenient. . . . And so what do you do when your confession crashes into your life? Perhaps your *physical* life is not in danger, but what would happen if your popularity were threatened, or your job were threatened? What are you afraid of losing that causes your confession to fail? Family, friends, career, reputation? Is the reason why our testimony and confession fail today because we are unwilling to be martyrs? When your confession crashes into your life, something has to give. And so either your confession gives way, or your life gives way.

Peter had to learn . . . and we have to learn, what our confession means. When theory becomes reality. What it means to proclaim and confess and testify that Jesus is our Saviour, "***the Christ, the Son of the living God.***" It is not an easy lesson to learn. And we cannot understand this by ourselves, on our own. No flesh and blood can. It can only be taught and revealed to us (as we heard last week) by our Father, who is in Heaven. Only the

Father, who sent His Son, and the Son who sends His Spirit, can teach us **that when our confession and life collide, by saving our life we lose it, and by losing our life we save it!** When confession and life collide, if it is our confession that gives way, have we saved our life? Or is it instead true that when our confession lives, we live. When our faith lives, we live. Because our life is not in the things of this world. We live in Christ. Christ crucified and risen. That is why after rebuking Peter, Jesus *teaches* His disciples – and us – ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”***

This is what Peter had to learn, and after the resurrection, after Pentecost and the sending of the Holy Spirit, he did learn it! And he did indeed become a martyr. But even before he was martyred, he understood that to save his life was to lose it. That his life was not the life that he lived here on this earth, but that his life was in his confession. That his life was hidden with God in Christ. And that to lose that was to lose everything. And so even before he is martyred, we read of his boldness, his fearless confessions in the face of trials and difficulties. His *rejoicing* in being found worthy to suffer for the Name of Christ. . . . Oh, he wasn't perfect. He still had his moments when he stumbled. But there is a difference in Peter, a freedom, which Luther later knew as well, that *“take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won; the Kingdom ours remaineth!”* For ***“whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”***

And this is the lesson that we have to learn as well. And its not an easy lesson. That when our confession and life collide, that by saving face, saving our place and status, saving our worldly security – that by saving our life in these ways, we really lose our life! But when our confession and life collide, by losing our life, we save it. And when that truth is revealed to you and instilled in you by the working of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you have a freedom that the world cannot know. The freedom that enabled Peter the denier to later confess and be killed for his faith. The freedom that enabled the martyrs of the early church to be tortured and slaughtered in the cruelest of ways. The freedom that enables you to stand firm in your faith, your confession, your testimony. . . . Oh, like Peter, we aren't perfect. The old sinful man in us will still have his day and will still cause us to do what we don't want to do. But that is not our life! Our life is hidden with God in Christ. And so born again in Christ through Holy Baptism, we are given a new life. United with Christ through His true body and blood, we are strengthened in our confession and life of faith. And day after day, week after week, year after year, we are kept in this life through the forgiveness of our sins. The forgiveness of our sins of weakness and denial, of doubt and fear. . . . Peter knew how precious this forgiveness was, as after denying Jesus three times he is given the opportunity to confess his love of his Saviour three times. He is forgiven, he is free. Free to live, free to confess, free to lose his life . . .

And dear brothers and sister in Christ, so are you! Through the merits of Jesus, earned for you through His death and resurrection, you are forgiven, and you are free! Free to live, free to confess, free to now lose your life . . . for you have been joined to the One who gave His life for the sin of the world, and rose from the dead for the life of the world. And so all who die in Him, in the faith and confession of His Name, live the life that He now lives, life from the dead, life eternal. You have that life already; it has already been promised and given to you! So live! Live in that freedom! Live, as St. Paul said, ***“to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”*** For you have nothing to fear. You really have nothing to lose! *“For take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won; the Kingdom ours remaineth!”*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.