

8 March 2009  
Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A Costly Confession”

Text: Mark 8:27-38 (Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 5:1-11)

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

As Jesus and His disciples are on the way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks them: **“Who do people say that I am?”** Well, the disciples report, the people still really don’t know. Sure, Jesus was healing people and driving out demons; He had performed great feeding miracles, and he even raised the dead . . . but the people were saying that He was just **John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of prophets**. They still weren’t getting it - that Jesus was *more* than a prophet, more than a miracle worker, more than a bread king.

Okay, but what about all of you?, Jesus then asks them. **Who do you guys say that I am?** What have you come to know . . . And Peter responds on behalf of all: **“You are the Christ.”** Which is, of course, the right answer. But what Peter’s right hand gives one moment, his left hand takes away the next. For while he knows the right answer, he does not really know it, for he does not know what it means. And so when Jesus tells them what it means that He is the Christ, that He **“must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed . . .”** Peter objects. Actually even worse than that, he pulls Jesus aside and rebukes Him for talking like that. The student tries to teach the teacher. And for his efforts, Peter receives a harsh rebuke back: **“Get behind me, Satan!”**

Those words sound pretty harsh to us, but they were the most loving thing Jesus could have said to Peter at that moment. To help him understand; to jolt him out of his wrong thinking; to open his ears and mind and heart to hear what Jesus was going to say next. That not only was it necessary for Jesus to take up the cross and be taken up on it to be our Saviour - Jesus then makes it plain: *it is necessary for them as well.* **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”** And if Peter didn’t like Jesus’ first talk of the cross, he really wasn’t going to like this second. But with it, Peter, and the others, begin to learn what it means to **set their minds of the things of God and not the things of man**. They begin to learn the difference between heaven and earth, between life and death.

And that is a lesson we must learn as well. A lesson not easy to learn.

Now that sounds a bit silly, I know - that we must learn the difference between the things of God and the things of man; between heaven and earth; between life and death. For doesn't everyone know that, whether they confess Jesus or not? Well, no. It's not quite that simple. For born as sinners into this world of sin, sin is all we know; sin looks normal; sin looks the way things are. And so we look at our world and think it okay, because (by nature) we don't know any better. We look at our brokenness and think that's what wholeness looks like. We go after things that cause death thinking they will give us life. And satan wants to keep us in this confused state, so that we are satisfied; so that we do not yearn for something better, and instead try to make the best of what we've got.

But then into this fallen and confused world stepped one who knew this world without sin, for He created it without sin. Into this world stepped one who had no sin and so knew the mind of God. Into this world stepped Jesus, the author of life, to show us life, to teach us life, and to give us life back again. Life not as we imagine it, but as He created it. The life that He lived - a life of love, a life of compassion, a life of truth. We see glimpses of those things in people today, that is true - but only as mere remnants of the way we were created. For sin has swallowed us up. Sin has corrupted us. And so my love for God and for others has grown cold; my compassion is often overwhelmed by selfishness; and my truth is far too often the lie I want it to be.

And so to confess Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament, the Saviour - as Peter did - is not just to confess something about Him, but also something about us. It is to confess that something is wrong that needs to be set right, and that I can't set right. *For what's wrong is me.* It's not just that the world is fallen and sinful, and that others are fallen and sinful - it's that I am fallen and sinful. And if fallen and sinful, then also unclean and in satan's clutches.

But it is exactly for fallen and sinful and unclean and in satan's clutches you that Jesus came, and why He came to suffer and die. He did not come to demand that you first "pick yourself up and dust yourself off and start all over again" - it is rather as St. Paul told us today, that ***"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** *While we were still sinners*, the Son of God came down and took us and our sins and our dusty death upon Himself, and took it all to the cross. *While we were still sinners*, He died our death to cleanse us from our sins. *While we were still sinners*, He reconciled us to the Father, to give us a new start and give us His life. *And please mark that well* - that Christ did not die to give us our old life back again; an old patched-up, warmed-over again life; but to give us *His* life. A new life. A better life. A life not bound to earth or that will end with death - but a life to live forever. Starting now.

That life comes only through His cross, *and* through His cross placed upon us. For in reality there are not *many* life-giving crosses, and we each get to choose the one we want to pick up and carry. No. There is only one cross that gives life: **His cross**. The Romans used lots of crosses to kill and punish lots of criminals, but there was no cross like Jesus' cross. For only on that cross hung the one whose death paid for the sins of the world. Only on that cross hung the one who not only died but rose from the dust of death. Only on that cross hung the one over whom death had no power, but who laid down His life into death in order to break the power of death in His resurrection. And now risen, He lives to give that life He won to us. That *just as He is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity, so might we*. (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Second Article)

And that life is what He now gives to you. His life, given to you when you were baptized into Him. His life, daily given to you in forgiveness in His Name. And His life, here given to you when you eat His body and drink His blood.

And thus given His life, now is not the time to rest, but to join the battle, as He calls us to do. To ***deny ourselves, take up our the cross and follow Him***. That is a call given in love, to love. It is a call not to make us earn something or to punish us or make us suffer, *but to save us*. To save us by putting to death in us - by His cross - all those things which lead us astray, that satan uses as hooks for his temptations - our greed, our lusts, our pride, our selfishness, our self-justifications, our fears, our stubbornness, and the many other sinful urges that live in us. For He who took the stony, barren womb of Sarah and transformed it and raised it to life to produce the fruit of His promised mercy and grace - also takes our cold, stony, and barren hearts and transforms them in His mercy and grace and raises us to life to produce the fruits of faith. To ***deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him*** in love, in compassion, in truth, in acts of mercy, in prayer, and in all manner of good works. It is a call to repentance and to faith, to live the new life He has given us.

And so joined to Christ and living in Christ, we learn the difference between the things of God and the things of man; between heaven and earth; between life and death. We learn that what we thought great . . . maybe not so much. We learn that what we thought was life was really killing us. And we learn that our life isn't something to save, but to give. *But we also learn that the life we give is nothing compared to the life we have received*. For that is the way of it with Jesus - He always gives more than He asks; and He always acts first - first giving us what He asks of us. And so all that we are, all that we have, and all that we give, is from Him. And as we have freely received, we now freely give.

And that is *true* freedom - the freedom that we have in Christ. That set free from our sins, we no longer live for them, but for others. And having received the life of Christ, we need not find our life and hope in the things of this world, that come and

go, that whither and die. And so even if suffering should come our way - if living the Christian life should cost us a higher place in this world, or bring us woe or ridicule and scorn, or cause us not to have or do what everyone else has and does - if this Christian life brings suffering our way, then as St. Paul said, ***“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.”*** Or in other words, we rejoice, because we are confident our Father is at work for us, in us, and through us, with his love - the love of the cross.

Peter and the others learned that day that to confess Christ is a costly confession. It is a battle cry against the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. It cost Christ His life, and it may well cost you yours. But if so, you have this promise: that ***whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*** A promise made sure because the victory has already been won. Christ is risen, the devil is defeated, and life is yours. So now is not the time to rest, but to join the struggle and come to the Supper. Now is not the time to rest, but to love - which (you know what?) is hard work. Now is not the time to rest - *but that time is coming.* When ***the Son of Man [will] come in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*** and take you to your rest. So do not give up; do not lose heart; do not be ashamed, but confess - and rejoice that you bear His name.

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

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