

[Service included the confirmation of Teresa Broaddus.]

Jesu Juva

“Confession, Unity, and Fellowship”

Text: Matthew 16:13-19 (Acts 15:1-12; Galatians 2:1-10)

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

Jesus said to them, “Who do you say that I am?”

That’s the question. There are many questions you have to answer in this life: What will I do? Who will I marry? Where will I go to school? Where will I live? Just to name a few. But none more important than this one. For this is the only one that will make a difference both now and forever.

Who do you say that I am?

Like in Jesus’ day, in our day and age there are many answers to that question, some that think highly of Jesus and some that do not. But Peter gets it right. ***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*** That sounds like such a simple response, maybe because we’re so used to it. But its simplicity betrays its depth of meaning. So we should take a moment to unpack Peter’s answer and appreciate again his confession, and ours - we who confess the same thing.

You are the Christ. You, Jesus of Nazareth. A true man, born of the virgin Mary. A true man, like every other man except without sin, who grew up in Nazareth and was obedient to His parents.

You, Jesus of Nazareth, ***are the Christ.*** Or in Hebrew, the Messiah. The one whom God promised long ago. The seed of the woman promised to Adam and Eve who would bruise the serpent’s head. The son of Abraham who would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. The prophet greater than Moses, and the son of David who would sit on his throne forever. You, Jesus of Nazareth, are the one: planned from eternity, promised in time, and now here as the one anointed to save us.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Yes, you are not only true man but also true God. *God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God*, as we confess it in the Creed. You are *more* than a prophet - you are the one who sends and speaks through the prophets. You are more than a man - you are the creator of men. That is who you are. God incarnate in human flesh. That’s a meaty confession.

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!" Blessed, for whoever confesses this is blessed. Blessed to know God and His love. Blessed, for to know and believe this is to have a Saviour, the promise of God fulfilled.

But notice, Peter gets this right not on his own, not because he is so smart and gets it all figured out, *for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you*, Jesus says, *but my Father who is in heaven*. The Father who sent His Son into the world to save it, also sends the Holy Spirit to point us to Jesus and work in us the faith to confess Him as *the Christ, the Son of the living God*. This confession is not from us or from any man - for who could think this up or imagine this? It is of God and from God to you.

Which is exactly what it means to *confess*: to speak back to God what He has spoken to us. He reveals Himself to us, and we say the same thing: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*.

And on this confession, Jesus says, *I will build my church*. It is His Church, not ours. Just as He reveals Himself so that we know and believe, so He builds His Church, not us. And because He does, *not even the gates of hell shall prevail against it*. Because the Church is built not by the work or sweat or ingenuity of men, which are no match for the powers of hell - but by the blood and forgiveness of Jesus. The blood and forgiveness of Jesus that opens the kingdom of heaven to all who believe. This is *The Church's One Foundation* (LSB #644).

And so we heard of the building of the Church in the readings from Acts and Galatians. We heard of both Peter and Paul, who we commemorate together today. But it was not them but their united confession that *we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus* through which the Holy Spirit worked to spread and build the Church. What Peter confessed to Jesus he continued to confess to both Jews and Gentiles, peasants and kings. Paul too, until their lives were taken from them by those who rejected this confession, this truth.

But their loss did not stamp out the Church. For as those today who oppose the Church are discovering, death and threats of death cannot destroy the Church. Or as the 2nd-century Church Father Tertullian wrote: "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church." The Church created not in defiance and strength, but by the water and blood that flowed from the side of the crucified Jesus. She is His new creation - you are His new creation - by water and the Word, and fed by His Body and Blood.

This is the faith that Teresa will confess in just a few moments. It is not *her* faith, as if she came up with it - it is *the* faith, revealed to her and believed and confessed by her. Just as for Peter and Paul and each of us. *Who do you say that I am? You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. And with this confession Teresa will also make this bold and

weighty claim as well, as you did: that she is ready to join Peter and Paul in shedding her blood rather than recant this confession.

Perhaps it is easy to make such a confession when the danger of death is not imminent for us as it is for other Christians around the world. But we say this not because we are so confident in our own ability and strength - we who, like Peter, so often fail and so quickly fold; and we under much smaller and lesser reasons than death. For often do we remain silent when we should speak simply because we are afraid of ridicule? How often are we afraid to be known as a Christian simply because it is uncool? How often do the people and things of this world dictate what we do rather than our faith, hope, and love of God?

But this bold claim still we make - not because we are confident in ourselves, but because we are confident of Christ's victory over death, confident of Christ's forgiveness, confident in Christ's promises. We will fail as all human flesh fails, but, we confess, Christ will not. Or as Luther famously penned, "*And take they our life, good, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, our victory has been won, the kingdom ours remaineth*" (LSB #656 v.4). So they can kill us if they want. Baptized into Christ, we've already gotten death over with, dying and rising with Him who laid down His life for us. And so, we confess, our life is now safe, hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3).

St. Paul knew it too. That's why he would say: *For me to live is Christ, to die is gain* (Philippians 1:21). That's a pretty good summary of life under the cross. Peter and Paul struggled against a lot of things; you struggle. Being a Christian means having a bulls eye on your back, that satan and the world love to shoot at. And the sinful nature you are born with is no friend either. But to believe that Jesus is ***the Christ, the Son of the living God*** is to believe that your life is built on a cornerstone that cannot be moved, and that to die is *gain*, not loss. That while you live there is forgiveness, and when you die there is life. In Him. In Christ. The only one who can provide these gifts for you. For He is the one who died for your sin and rose for your life.

And thus built on this confession, we are built together; we are united. One Church, one body, here. Nothing else could do that. In Peter and Paul's day that union was the miraculous union of Jews and Gentiles, and even of Peter and Paul themselves, fisherman and Pharisee - and some of us here today are as different as that. For really, what do we all have in common? We are from all parts of the country and even the globe, and now from Stafford in the south to Purcellville in the west to Cockeyville in the north to DC in the east. We are young and old, with different tastes and styles, different education and jobs, different political views, families and singles - *I even root for Philadelphia teams!* And yet here we are, united. One. For we have something that transcends all that, all worldly differences, and unites us as one. This confession: ***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*** That confession, embodied in our liturgy, makes us one.

And so as we heard in the Epistle from Galatians, when this unity, this oneness, was recognized in the early church, James and John and Peter ***gave the right hand of fellowship*** - or of *koinonia*, of communion - to Barnabas and Paul. They were one in all things. Today, it is Teresa. United in our confession she will unite with us at the Table also. One Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:5). One confession, one Body, one Supper. And the prayer of Jesus, to make us one (John 17:11), is answered again.

So perhaps today we should say: ***Blessed are you, Teresa Bar-Bearchell,* for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but [your] Father who is in heaven.*** And remember that we have been similarly blessed. And if our vows are demanded of us, if our lives are demanded of us, know that will be a blessing too. For whether we are martyrs, die of old age, or Jesus comes again first, the promise is the same: *that we like saints before us, will see [our Saviour] face to face* (LSB #644, v. 5). For yes, ***Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.*** And to confess this makes all the difference in the world.

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

* - For you grammar sticklers, yes, I know that "Bar-" is grammatically incorrect in this context. However, I wanted to maintain the aural connection with the Gospel reading rather than be grammatically correct. Forgive me!