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Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Question of Our Time”

Text: Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 11:33-12:8

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

Who do you say that I am?

This is the most important question you will ever be asked. *Who do you say Jesus is?* It is the most important thing you can teach your children. Learning reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic is important, getting a good, well-paying job is nice, and playing sports is fun, but this . . . on this depends your eternal life. *Who do you say Jesus is? For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

Peter, speaking on behalf of the twelve, gets it right. But not all people know this. Some, they report, think that who Jesus is is John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others think Jesus a prophet, an Elijah or a Jeremiah. So some folks are still trying to figure Him out; connect the dots.

But there’s more. More answers to this question. The twelve are holding back. Because there are others who have made up their minds about Jesus and refuse to believe. And what *they* are saying about Jesus is that He is an illegitimate child, born to Joseph and Mary out of wedlock. He’s a lunatic, a blasphemer, making claims about Himself that are insane. Or that He’s possessed by the devil, or even the devil himself. That’s what some are saying, too. They look at Jesus and His poverty and who He hangs out with, and who He praises and who He criticizes, and how He doesn’t do what they think He should be doing, and how He doesn’t go along or get along with the religious leaders of His day, and so think: Nah! Can’t be. This Jesus isn’t Messiah material.

And there are people today who say all those things as well. Some still trying to connect the dots about Jesus, but some rejecting Him bitterly for His teaching, that it is not in step with the times, or what they want.

But Peter, speaking on behalf of all the twelve, gets it right. Not because they’re smarter. For, Jesus says, ***not by flesh and blood*** do Peter and the others know this, but because ***it has been revealed to them by the Father who is in heaven***. That ***Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God***. That is, that Jesus is the promised Messiah. The one all the Old Testament was pointing toward. Promised first to Adam and Eve, after they sinned, and

then promised again and again and again, through patriarchs and prophets and down through the ages. And now come. This man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the *embodiment* of those Scriptures, those promises. He is who they say. He does what they say. He is God, the Son of God, in human flesh. God Himself, come to save a world condemned to die in sin by taking that sin upon Himself and dying with it, dying for it, to remove that curse from us so we can live again. Live now in freedom and hope, and live forever in joy and peace.

And so *it is on this rock*, on this confession, of who Jesus is and what He has done, that Jesus ***builds His Church***. A Church that in times and places may not look like much, just as Jesus did not look like much; just an ordinary man. And a Church that may be despised and scorned, just as Jesus was despised and scorned. And crucified! And the Church - and you! - may be, too. But to this Church, as we heard Jesus say today, has been given the life-giving Word to confess to the world. The Word of forgiveness in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God. This Word that opens heaven! This Word against which *the gates of hell cannot prevail*.

But just as in Jesus' day, some don't - won't - believe that. It just can't be. If the Church is so great, it must look great, and have great and powerful people, and be big and successful and admired. Not be weak and small and poor. If Jesus is building His Church, He's not doing a very good job.

The thing is . . . people know there's a problem. They know this world isn't as it should be. There's division and war and death. There's disease and hatred and disaster. There's inequality and prejudice and abuse. And to these there must be an answer! There must be a solution. And if the Church isn't it, if God isn't it, if Jesus isn't it, there must be another god to turn to, another way to fix what's wrong, another way to save ourselves. And this god, it turns out, is us. We must save ourselves. We must save our planet. We must save our lives. It is up to us. That's a lot to ask! That's a heavy burden to bear. And one that is causing a lot of anxiety and uncertainty and despair in our world today.

And one way - not the *only* way - but one way we can see this today is, ironically, with people asking the very same question Jesus asked: ***Who do you say that I am?*** But they're asking it in a very different way. Jesus asked that question to save us. People today ask it to *save themselves*.

Who do you say that I am? or its cousin, ***Who do I say that I am?*** is the question of our day. And you are expected to answer rightly, and use the right pronouns, and not misgender, and not go against even the most absurd claims of who someone says they are - and your life and livelihood may depend on it. For to deny that, we are told, is violence. To deny that is therefore to cause harm. To deny that is then to take that person's life - that person who is only trying to save himself; who is only trying to be true to herself. So you must be dealt with. Even crucified, maybe.

How very different Jesus, who came to be the Saviour we could never be. The gates of hell can and will overcome our best efforts. If Adam and Eve, who had no sin effecting their bodies and minds, couldn't stand against them, how are we, born in sin, going to stand? But what if we had someone to stand against them for us? One without sin. One to unlock the chains of our slavery to sin, the chains dragging us down to hell, the chains of bitterness, hatred, anger, unchastity, promiscuity, abuse, selfishness, greed, pride, lies, excuses, discontent, rebellion, and self-worship. One to raise us up to life and freedom again. One to show us that what is called "normal" in this world isn't, in fact, normal at all. And not good. And not life-giving.

Who do you say that I am? You, Jesus, are that one! To save us from the sin, death, and hell **without** and around us, and from the sin, death, and hell **within** us, that has infected us. That entering into death with us, we enter into life with you. You are the one to wash us clean, to pronounce us loved and forgiven, and to give us that blood transfusion that we need, that we be healthy and whole and alive again. Not just living until we die, but living a life that cannot die.

And those are two very different things! Living until you die, and living a life that cannot die. Do you think those two kinds of lives will look different? They should. But if your life doesn't, if you look and act and think and believe like everyone else, Christian or not, ask yourself *why*? What's effecting you? What's influencing you? What's stopping you? What's shaping you? What's catechizing you? And with such a life are you *gaining* life? Or just living until you die?

The apostle Paul was dealing with this problem among the Christians in Rome, too. Our problems aren't new. So as we heard today, he said: ***Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing*** - examining yourself, your life, your thinking against the truth of God's Word - ***you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect***. And when you do, repent. Repent that your confession and your life haven't been as one, and receive that life and renewing you need. The forgiveness of the one who has come to save you and set you free.

Because once you say who you are, in repentance, a poor, miserable sinner, whose confession and life haven't been as one, **you need to hear from Jesus. *Who do you, Jesus, say that I am?*** And He says, you are My beloved child. Baptized, forgiven, free. You are a guest at My Table - eat My Body and drink My Blood and be filled with My life. And I have a place prepared for you in My kingdom, in that life that will never end. **And that is who you are because that is what I have done for you.** So don't try to save yourself - *I've already done that!* Go and live. Not thinking of yourself more highly than you ought, but serving others. Laying down your life for them as I have for you. Because you have a life in Me that will not end, *a life that cannot die*.

Last time I was here with you before I went on vacation, Lilian was baptized into that faith and Ben confessed it and took his place at our Lord's Table, both of them receiving, with us, that forgiveness, life, and salvation we all need. Soon we will have more such confessions, and more baptisms. And in them we rejoice, to see the Lord building His Church, just as He promised. And it is *His* work, not ours. His Word, His forgiveness. And built on that rock (LSB #645), the confession of Jesus as ***the Christ, the Son of the living God***, the Church will not, can not, fall. *Even*, as we just sang, *when steeples are falling, when crumbled have spires in every land* (v. 1), the resurrection of Jesus is greater than all, and His Word will sound forth - from underground churches, house churches, small churches - it matters not. For the power is not in the size or appearance, but in the Word, and the Spirit will continue to work through that Word, *calling the young and old to rest*, as well as *the souls distressed, longing for rest everlasting*. And that rest we receive. The rest not of doing nothing, but the rest of a living and active faith, active in serving, in good works, in forgiveness and love, because it is a faith that rests in the words and promises of Jesus, in His freedom, forgiveness, and love. And so it is a life confident and bold that we are living a life that cannot die. Because of who Jesus is and all that He has done. For me. For you. For us. For all.

Do you think people might need to hear that? People who are trying to save themselves? Who are worried and anxious and desperate about the future? That there's another way, a better way? Another ONE, come to save us?

Who do you say that I am? It really is the question of our time. A question of life and death. ***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God***, we say. Our Saviour. And *You are My child, a child of the living God*, He says. With a life that cannot die. Good news, indeed.

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.