

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 23, 2026 jj
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We are a confessional church. That can probably mean a lot of different things to different people. I could probably ask it like Jesus did in today's Gospel: What do people mean when they say confessional Lutheran? And the answers would vary just as widely as they did for the Lord who asked His followers: Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?

Last month at our Synod Convention, if you were called "confessional" that meant that you lined up with people of a certain viewpoint, advocated for certain policy positions, opposed changes that would take the leadership of our Synod in a certain political direction. While group labels are inevitable, I would argue that we need to deepen our understanding of what confessional means, or else abandon the term altogether. Jesus wants more out of us than merely what group we identify with.

So when Jesus asks this question that we hear Him ask His disciples at the beginning of our Gospel reading, What is Jesus looking for, by the way, some sort of opinion poll results? Is He planning to run for office and trying to get Himself enough votes? No, what He desires, what He hungers and thirsts after from us, is confession. He isn't concerned about popular opinion, He wants to know what His disciples, He wants to know what you believe, and say, about Him.

We have the word confess in today's Collect of the Day, the opening theme prayer that was chosen to reflect our readings and collect them together in an organized summary. Here's the Collect: Almighty

God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life that we may boldly confess Him to be the Christ and steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life eternal, through the same, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

How does this prayer relate to the Gospel we heard today? It is, after all, the record of Peter confessing Jesus to be the Christ! Normally you hear "confess" and that means confess your sins. In that sense, when you confess, you agree with God's commandments and what they say about you and then you admit to the Lord that you have broken those rules. That's the usual understanding of "confess."

To confess Jesus, on the other hand, is to agree with what the Bible says about Him, that God the Father sent Him to live in our human flesh, to take our sins from us and suffer punishment in our place, to die on the cross to save us, and to rise from the dead on the third day to win the victory for us and all believers. You admit along with Peter that He is the Christ! One might ask you on the spot, why is that past stuff important for me now? You could respond something like this: I, a poor miserable sinner, need to believe that this is all true, but even more, that Jesus did all these Christ-like, Messiah worthy things for me. Same for you, just as it was true for Peter.

We can't believe any of this on our own. Flesh and blood did not reveal this wonderful truth of Jesus to any of His disciples, nor do we know this by ourselves. God the Father has given this great gift to

you, that the Word you hear today is the Word of your forgiveness, the Word of your salvation. We'll hear many different options in our world today, and many of our loved ones have fallen for these alternative, nonbiblical ideas, but God has called us to confess this one true faith in our one and only Savior, Jesus.

When you say in public with your solemn promise that you believe what God's Word says, that you believe what is taught here is in full and correct alignment with God's Word, and that you desire to take part in the pastoral, spiritual care that is offered here in this church, then you are part of our communion fellowship where you declare publicly to one another, This is My faith!

That is what our new members who have recently joined our church say. Those of you who have been a part of the congregation longer than that, go ahead and renew those vows every once in a while. We welcome everyone to Christ Our Savior and want you also to join in the confession of Jesus Christ that we all share with one another! If those of you visiting would like to know more about what we teach from God's Word, feel free to pick up a catechism booklet—they're free, and you may get in touch with me anytime. I would love to talk to you more!

Notice then in our Gospel reading, after Jesus notes that Peter gave the one, true and proper confession of You are the Christ, son of the living God, then our Lord declares that this confession that came out of Peter's mouth is a rock, a foundation, an immovable base, on which He will build His Church. Buildings, budgets, and activities all have their place, but what really makes the Church is the bold statement—Jesus Christ

is our Lord and Savior. Faith and trust in Him is the foundation.

We have come for the forgiveness of sins that He has promised. We don't come to hear about a hope for salvation, or an encouragement to keep striving for reconciliation with God, like the prophets did. Jesus is greater than all those former preachers and their preparatory messages. He is here today to give more than positive thinking techniques, or ways to bring success into your life.

If real, actual forgiveness is given to you here in this earthly place, and it is in fact given out every week, then it's a forgiveness that is valid in heaven also, in front of Almighty God's judgment throne, where it really counts. If someone says no to forgiveness, or I don't believe God's Word when it says this or that, then the Church has to warn that person that he or she needs to stop resisting, or else lose their faith permanently. No faith in Jesus, no place in heaven's kingdom.

Once they repent though, then the Church is right there to give that person the forgiveness Jesus has already earned. Even the way Jesus says it guarantees the forgiveness has already happened. Now this activity of delivering forgiveness and warning against unbelief is what it means for Peter and the whole Church along with him to possess the keys of heaven. It has nothing to do with Peter or the Pope being in charge of who is saved and who is not. From beginning to end, it's all about forgiveness.

That's really why we are a Church, and why we do what we do; we are His Church, even if all the other stuff goes away. We are not only a Lutheran Church, since a whole

variety of churches go by that name, but we are a confessional Lutheran Church, which means we confess, like Peter did, the truth about Jesus, and we have not changed what the Bible says about the Christian faith. If we're going to keep using the word, it has got to mean that above all else. We made a promise as a Church to stay true to our confession of faith-- it's even in our congregation's constitution-- and you can read what we believe in a book called the Lutheran Confessions.

Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church. Gates, both then and now, are meant for protection, so that means Jesus and His Church are on the attack against hell, Satan and evil. Really? How do we attack? When we proclaim forgiveness, when we stand by God's Word and confess who Jesus is to our sinful and evil world, that's how we launch the effective offensive against the evil enemies that have plenty of their own attacks aimed at us as well. The Lord's Prayer ends with deliverance from all that evil throws our way, but hell's gates will not win, they don't have a chance against the worldwide kingdom of God.

Sure, they may sue churches and win some cheap-shot attacks on this or that congregation, pastor or institution, but Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God-- He will win the final battle for us His entire Church, and hell will not prevail against it. You're on the winning team!

You are part of that winning team when you confess, as Peter did, Jesus is your Lord, that He has gone to the cross for you, and when you are confident that it's not because of what you have done, but always and only because of what Jesus has done for you, that

you have the certainty of forgiveness and everlasting life. You will also have the ability to share that faith with others, and they will receive the benefit of your good works that you do for them. That's what the prayer is talking about when we ask our Almighty God to grant that we "steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life eternal."

We will constantly need God's help in this ongoing journey of ours, for the confession that Peter spoke of Jesus was not his, but a gift given to him from the heavenly Father. Peter had times of wavering faith, as we will see in the very next reading that comes up next Sunday. You will have the same problems in your Christian walk. You are a sinner; confess that about yourself and be forgiven.

When you also make your public confession of faith in Jesus and your full agreement with what this confessional Lutheran Church teaches about Him, then you come forward with your fellow confessors of the faith to eat and drink Christ's Body and Blood. Once again, as you do in so many and various ways, you receive forgiveness, as well as the strength and power of the Holy Spirit.

When you've been to church, then you know you've been forgiven, and you're ready for heaven whenever God calls you home, but until that day comes, you're ready also for whatever the coming week will bring!

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.