



FIRST LESSON

**ISAIAH 51:1-6**

PSALM

**PSALM 138**

SECOND LESSON

**ROMANS 12:1-8**

GOSPEL LESSON

**ST. MATTHEW 16:13-20**

PRAAYER OF THE DAY

**O GOD, WITH ALL YOUR FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS OF EVERY AGE, WE PRAISE YOU, THE ROCK OF OUR LIFE. BE OUR STRONG FOUNDATION AND FORM US INTO THE BODY OF YOUR SON, THAT WE MAY GLADLY MINISTER TO ALL THE WORLD, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD. AMEN.**

**9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.  
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,  
COLORADO 80111**

VOICE

**(303) 770-9300**

FAX

**(303) 770-9301**

WEB

**WWW.STPLC.ORG**



*Living in God's amazing grace*

**Liturgical Day: The Fifteenth Sunday of Easter**

**Date: August 24, 2008**

**Sermon Title: To Forgive, or Not To Forgive, That Is...**

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I once read a book about Martin Luther, and the author described him as both the best thing and the worst thing to ever happen in the Christian Church. What he meant was this: In rediscovering the heart of the Gospel, and in making the point that every Christian ought to be a serious student of the Bible, Luther brought a new life to the church and to the faith that it hadn't seen in many years. People were no longer beholden to the power structure of the church for grace or understanding. They could receive forgiveness directly from God. They could be individually inspired by the Holy Spirit as they studied the Scriptures.

He went on to claim that the down side of Luther's influence is that from that point on, there would never be the same kind of unity in the church that we had known before Luther. With believers free to study the word, and to come to their own conclusions, what would follow would be disagreements, divisions, and the denominational chaos that would have scandalized people of Luther's day, but which has become commonplace today.

The author makes a good point, and to a certain degree I agree with him. But this week's Gospel lesson reminds us that it is not entirely that simple. The existence of division in the church is not all Luther's responsibility. Even in the time of Jesus, there was a wide range of opinions about who he was and what his ministry was all about.

We see that in this morning's Gospel lesson. Jesus and the disciples are way up north, far, far away from Jerusalem, in Caesarea Philippi. While there, Jesus asks his disciples what they are hearing from the crowds. Who do they think Jesus actually is? The responses are varied. Some think he is John the Baptist, returned from the dead. Others think he is Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets, come back to God's people. There seems to be a fairly wide range of opinion here, and none of them, it turns out, are right. John. Elijah. Jeremiah. One of the prophets. There was no lack of disagreement, even in the earliest days of the Christian movement.

I suppose that is why Jesus asks the next question. He addresses his disciples directly, and says, "But who do you say that I am?" The question is addressed to the whole group, but as we've come to anticipate, Peter is the first one to jump up and say something. He blurts out: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." We'll find out next week (in Matthew 16:22) that Peter didn't know what he was talking about. But for now, Jesus is happy to commend him for his insight, to interpret that confession of faith as a gift from the Holy Spirit, and to declare that on this faith, the church will be built.

Jesus does even more than that. In this passage, he goes on to explain what it will mean to call him Messiah – or Christ – or Savior. It has to do with what he calls, "The Keys of the Kingdom." Peter is given the authority of "binding" and "loosing." What he is binding and loosing, of course is sin. With these words, Jesus declares that at the very center of what it will mean to be a follower of the Crucified One, is to be involved in forgiveness. At the very center of what will become known as the Christian church, will be the determined intention to see that people experience forgiveness, and what's more, that this forgiveness is allowed to become a transforming experience in their lives. If that is the case, some may wonder why Jesus expects Peter to forgive (or loose) in some circumstances, and to not forgive (or bind) in other circumstances.

It has to do with what forgiveness means. I'm not sure we understand that very well anymore. Many people in our day have come to think that forgiveness means receiving a free pass. We do something wrong. We say, "Oops. My Bad. Sorry." And the one we've harmed is supposed to say, "That's O.K. I forgive you."

The truth is: true forgiveness runs much deeper than that. True forgiveness is built upon the foundations of honesty and humility and vulnerability. True forgiveness begins when the one who has committed the offense takes seriously the wrong that was committed and the harm that was done. When confession takes that form – when we have a sense of remorse, and wish we hadn't done what we did – then when the gift of forgiveness comes, it can literally change our lives.

And so there will be times when it is important for the church not to forgive. When someone is just trying to get away with an offense... when there is a behavior pattern that shows no sign of ever changing... when the request for forgiveness is just a free pass, the church is called not to forgive. Instead, we are called to engage with the wrongdoer and try to help that person understand the severity of the wrong. We are to help them get to the point where they are longing for forgiveness. Then, and only then, can the church extend the gift of forgiveness, and know that it can be a healing and empowering experience to do so.

I remember working with a family as they dealt with the presence of alcoholism in their midst. For years the family had given this drinker a free pass. They'd say things like, "Oh, that wasn't him doing that. It was just the drinking. When he sobers up, he'll apologize." And, of course, he always did. And, of course, the family always forgave him. And, of course, that was an open invitation for him to drink again, because he knew he could always get away with whatever he did when he was drunk. But eventually they lost their patience, and their ability to put up with his behavior. They struggled with that, because they were Christians. They felt called to be a forgiving family. But once they became convinced that there was a deeper, more profound kind of forgiveness – one that could actually help to change this family member's life, they decided to take the risk and put it to work. So the next time he became drunk, they refused to say those familiar words. As a matter of fact, they gathered together with some of his closest friends, and laid out in front of him the pain he was causing to himself and to them. They held him accountable for his behavior. He resisted, at first, hoping to turn them back towards the easy words of forgiveness they had shared in the past. But when he saw how determined they were, he began to see how wrong his behavior was, and he agreed to seek treatment, so he could show them how serious he was, and hopefully receive the kind of true forgiveness that changes lives and relationships. It was a long road for Don, but he has been sober for a number of years now, and his relationships with family and friends are much healthier these days. There are times when people of faith are called to withhold forgiveness.

There will also be times when repentance is genuine. There will be times when a person has committed a wrong, has come to understand how significant that is, and longs to be reunited with the one who was wronged. In those instances, the church is called to forgive fully. That can be as difficult as not forgiving someone. We are only human, and it is natural for humans to want revenge – to get even – to make that person pay for what was done. In those times, we are called to march to the beat of a different drummer. We are called to step away from our own selfishness and our own hurt feelings, and enter into the transforming work of forgiveness to which Jesus calls us.

One of the most powerful examples of this that the world has seen lately, of course, was in West Nickel Mines School in Bart Township, Pennsylvania, where a lone gunman took over a small one-room Amish school. Five little girls were killed, and the world was stunned. But the response of that community was remarkable. They immediately began to speak publicly about their desire to forgive, and they reached out to the family of the killer. When donations started arriving from all around the world, they used a generous portion of those donations to care for the family of the man who shot those girls and then shot himself. As they fully embraced, and loved, and forgave the family of the man who had killed their children, they lived out their calling to be followers of the Crucified One – believers who are deeply and radically committed to work forgiveness in all of their relationships.

So... who do you say that Christ is? There are those who will ask that question of us from time to time. And the heart of evangelism is to have an answer to the question that Jesus poses this week. As we think

about Jesus, our Savior (the one who forgives us and makes us right with God), who do we say that he is? As we think about Jesus, our Lord (the one who commands us to follow him with our lives), who do we say that he is? What does it mean to live with Jesus at the very center of our lives?

I hope you'll take those questions, and your initial answers, home with you and spend some time with them today. Perhaps you'll even share them with a family member or a friend, and discover what you can learn from one another.

Let us pray... Gracious God, there is much that we have done, which cries out for forgiveness. There is much that others have done, for which we need to extend forgiveness to them. Help us to keep that gracious impulse central in our lives, as we seek to live among one another as Jesus lived among us. It is in his strong name that we pray. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (August 24, 2008)

English Text: <sup>i</sup>

<sup>16.13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. <sup>ii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>16.13</sup> Ἐλθὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὰ μέρη Καισαρείας τῆς Φιλίππου ἠρώτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων· τίνα λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου; <sup>14</sup> οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· οἱ μὲν Ἰωάννην τὸν βαπτιστὴν, ἄλλοι δὲ Ἠλίαν, ἕτεροι δὲ Ἰερεμίαν ἢ ἓνα τῶν προφητῶν. <sup>15</sup> λέγει αὐτοῖς· ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι; <sup>16</sup> ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος εἶπεν· σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος. <sup>17</sup> ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ· μακάριος εἶ, Σίμων Βαριωνά, ὅτι σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα οὐκ ἀπεκάλυψεν σοὶ ἀλλ' ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. <sup>18</sup> καγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ἄδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς. <sup>19</sup> δώσω σοὶ τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν δήσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. <sup>20</sup> τότε διεστείλατο τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἵνα μηδενὶ εἴπωσιν ὅτι αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός. <sup>iii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html).

<sup>ii</sup> St. Matthew 16:13-20, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Matthew 16:13-20, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.