



Liturgical Day: The Confession of Saint Peter

Date: January 18, 2009

Sermon Title: Unity in Christ

mystery revealed
who do you say that I am?
faith in Christ unites

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

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" That was the question Jesus asked his disciples, as St. Matthew records it in the 16th chapter of his Gospel – and it is a question that believers have been asking ever since. "Who do the people say that the son of Man is?" We are at the beginning of "The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" – the week that stands between two church festivals: "The Confession of Saint Peter" (January 18), and "The Conversion of Saint Paul" (January 25). Those two festivals are fitting bookends for this week: we Lutherans might say that there was no better Catholic than Saint Peter, and no better Lutheran than Saint Paul. But Saint Peter might also stand for one who was brought into a relationship with God through an experience with Jesus Christ, and Saint Paul might also stand for one whose relationship with God was transformed by an experience with Jesus Christ. Or we could refer to the agreement reached in Acts 15, and remember that Peter was sent to minister primarily among those who grew up Jewish, and Paul was sent to minister primarily among those who grew up Gentile. At any rate, the festivals of these two Apostles, who in a number of ways represent the whole church in all its diversity, seem to provide an appropriate beginning and ending for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

On the other hand, we consider the question Jesus asked: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" and remember that the church, today, seems about as sharply divided as it has ever been. We seem divided between conservatives and liberals; between lovers of contemporary music and lovers of traditional music; between those who baptize infants and those who only baptize adults; between those who prefer the Eucharist weekly, and those who would rather experience it less often; between those who think that we choose God, and those who think that God chooses us, between those who support the Israelis and those who support the Palestinians... the list goes on. During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the divisions between Christian groups today seem almost insurmountable, and we find ourselves often far more aware of what distinguishes us, than what unites us.

We shouldn't be surprised at that – it has always been the case. And it makes sense: as long as the church is composed of humans, and as long as God is only partially revealed to us, it's isn't especially shocking that we would come to differing conclusions on matters of faith and practice. It was that way from the very beginning. You recall how the question of Jesus was originally answered, don't you? Some thought Jesus to be John the Baptist, returned from the dead. We don't know why. Maybe they looked alike (after all, they were relatives). Maybe their messages seemed very similar. We don't know why, but some thought that Jesus was John, come back to life. Others thought Jesus was Elijah, and that makes some sense: Elijah was the only person in the Hebrew Bible who didn't die. He was taken up to heaven in a golden chariot. Others thought that Jesus was

Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Israel had believed, for years, that the day would come when

FIRST LESSON

ACTS 4:8-13

PSALM

PSALM 18:1-6, 16-19

SECOND LESSON

1ST CORINTHIANS 10:1-5

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MATTHEW 16:13-19

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
INSPIRED SIMON PETER
TO CONFESS JESUS AS
THE MESSIAH AND SON OF
THE LIVING GOD. KEEP
YOUR CHURCH FIRM ON
THE ROCK OF THIS FAITH,
SO THAT IN UNITY AND
PEACE IT MAY PROCLAIM
ONE TRUTH AND FOLLOW
ONE LORD, YOUR SON,
JESUS CHRIST OUR
SAVIOR, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND
FOREVER. AMEN.**

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God would send one of the prophets of old back to the people, to turn them from their sin, and restore the nation to its historic glory. As striking as Jesus must have been, it is no great surprise that some of the people thought that. It is interesting, isn't it, that there was almost as much diversity in the earliest groups of Jesus' followers as there is in the church today. Much as we might want to think that our way of understanding him is the only true way to approach the faith, even from the very beginning there has never been one true, common way to understand Jesus and his ministry.

Perhaps that's why Peter's declaration of faith is so important. Perhaps that is why the church has set aside this day, each year, to remember his confession and learn from it. Peter's words put it all into perspective. We can disagree about politics, and what sort of music to use at worship. We can disagree about how to celebrate the sacraments, the theological nuances of salvation. But on one thing, the church must agree: that at the center of our lives as believers, and at the center of our relationship with God is the confession of Jesus as Messiah – as the Son of the Living God. It is on that truth, that Jesus promised to build the church. It is on that truth that Jesus would stake the future of the movement he began.

That, after all, is the heart of the church's ministry: we are all saved by the good news of Jesus Christ – by the promise that comes to us through Jesus, the Messiah and the son of the living God. We confess that to be true, and that confession stands at the very center of our faith. If the church is doing what it has been called to do, it ought not be dividing us up, based on beliefs and practices and commitments that distinguish us from one another. Instead, it should be helping us to see that in Christ, there is far more that unites us than divides us.

About a year ago we launched a blog called "One Little Word." Most of you receive a weekly update to that blog every Tuesday evening – a devotional message focused on one of the texts for the coming Sunday. That blog is also a place where I occasionally post some theological ramblings, or make note of something that helps us to take a closer look at what it means to be faithful today.

Well, one of the very first posts in that category was called the "[Religiosity Scales Project](#)." ⁱ In that post, I invited you to take a survey – a survey that intended to determine to what degree you are:

- an evangelical Christian
- a Christian conservative
- an activist
- a golden rule believer
- a community involvement enthusiast
- or a mystic

Community involvement and evangelical topped my list, which is probably no surprise to those of you who know much about me.

I bring this survey up because it points out how we tend to view one another these days. We tend to divide ourselves up into sub-groups within the Christian family. Who supports this or that side of an issue? Who embraces this or that as a priority? Whose theology influences their politics in this way or that.

This morning, it seems that Jesus and Peter would teach us that this approach misses the mark. Christian faith is not all about what distinguishes us. Christian faith is all about whether or not Jesus is, for us, the Messiah – the Son of the Living God. It is all about whether or not Jesus is, for us, the central guiding force in our lives. It is all about, for us, whether or not we (like Peter) come to understand ourselves as disciples of this one who loved us enough to give his life for us.

As his followers indicated, there were almost as many guesses about who Jesus was in the first century as there were people to guess. The same is true today: when one first looks at the worldwide family of faith that is gathered in Jesus' name, it seems to be more diverse than it is united. This morning, Peter's confession reminds us that no matter how diverse we may be in the conclusions we reach about faith issues, what unites

ⁱ Posted on "One Little Word" at <http://onelittleword.org/?p=14>. The project is related to a web-based research project coordinated by Marsha Cutting, Associate Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (in Waterloo, Ontario). Specific information related to the project is available at <http://www.religiositiescalesproject.com>.

us is far greater than anything that ever threatens to divide us. The ancient confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, binds us together across all that seeks to divide us.

So at the beginning of this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we ask that God might help us to see the unity that already exists among us, despite our differences. And may the spirit guide us to live together in such a way that the whole world becomes aware of the unity we share, and the grace that we receive from knowing Jesus as the Messiah – as the Son of the Living God.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 18, 2009)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

^{16.13} Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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." ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

^{16.13} Ἐλθὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὰ μέρη Καισαρείας τῆς Φιλίππου ἠρώτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων· τίνα λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου; ¹⁴ οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· οἱ μὲν Ἰωάννην τὸν βαπτιστὴν, ἄλλοι δὲ Ἡλίαν, ἕτεροι δὲ Ἰερεμίαν ἢ ἓνα τῶν προφητῶν. ¹⁵ λέγει αὐτοῖς· ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι; ¹⁶ ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος εἶπεν· σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος. ¹⁷ ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ· μακάριος εἶ, Σίμων Βαριωνᾶ, ὅτι σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα οὐκ ἀπεκάλυψεν σοι ἄλλ' ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. ¹⁸ καγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ἄδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς. ¹⁹ δώσω σοι τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν δήσης ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσης ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.^{iv}

ii A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

iii St. Matthew 16:13-19, 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).

iv St. Matthew 16:13-19, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).