

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin R. Eden

Pentecost 12
Saturday, August 22, 2020 at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, August 23, 2020 at 9:00 a.m.

“You are the Christ”

Matthew 16:13-20

The school year has begun, which means as of Monday, I am teaching 5th and 6th grade religion at St. James each morning. I still had the book from last year. I started looking ahead and Lesson 1 is entitled “Who is God?” This fits in nicely with our readings this week. Then I remembered that I need to call the school and get the other book, because we switch back and forth each year.

But even though “Who is God?” will not be the lesson on Monday, today Jesus makes it very clear that it is an important question. The reality is that we will not be able to completely answer the question. Paul says in Romans, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable (that is, how impossible to understand) are His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?”

I could spend every morning for the next 200 years learning and teaching and never come to a full explanation of “Who is God?” However, God is not random or vague or completely unknowable. It is true that I cannot **explain** Him in a complete and certain sense. However, I can **confess** Him in completeness, certainty, and even simplicity.

We don't pretend to understand God. We confess Him. This is why we confess the creeds. Everything you need to know about what God has done for you, you confess in the words of the Nicene Creed. Everything you need to know about the incomprehensible nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit you confess in the Athanasian Creed. Everything you need to confess as an expression of the faith of your Baptism you confess in the Apostle's Creed. This is why we confess the creeds.

We need to say more than simply "I believe in Jesus" or "I believe everything in the Bible." Those are good things to say. Those statements are certainly true for a faithful Christian. But if we are not able to say more than that, that would be a confession of faith in a random and vague God. Look at all the ways in which Jesus is presented in our world today. Look at all the ways in which our society expresses "spirituality" about God. Jesus says, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus wants to know, "Who do you say I am?"

This was the question Jesus asked the disciples, because, much like our world today, the crowd had a variety of opinions as to what the answer was to that question. King Herod, who had beheaded John the Baptist, thought that Jesus was John the Baptist reincarnated, and apparently that was a popular view among the Herodians – the more secular Jews who were not associated with the Pharisees or Sadducees.

Among those who were desiring to be pious children of Abraham, the Old Testament prophecy of the Son of Man was understood that He would be the Messiah promised to Adam and Abraham and their children. And the Son of Man/Messiah was also understood to be the Son of God. God being Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit was not a New Testament idea that Jesus introduced. However, like in our world today, there were others who had wildly diverse ideas about who the Son of Man is and what the Messiah would do when He comes.

The Messiah, the Christ is the Son of God. The Messiah, the Christ being the Son of God is spoken of by Nathaniel when Jesus calls him to be a disciple, by the high priest Caiphas when Jesus is on trial. The Jewish rabbis, 100 years before Jesus is born, write about this in the Talmud – which is the written collection of their oral teachings.

There was a large group within the Jewish community who desired to be pious and faithful. Among the Jewish crowd, there were popular beliefs about the Messiah and the Son of Man. When Jesus asks, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” It is a loaded question. Some say Elijah. Elijah was hugely popular among the Jews. In the 400+ years in between the Old and New Testament times, the theology of Elijah had taken on a life of its own.

Why? Because the second to last verse written by Malachi (the final Old Testament prophet) says, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” That is pretty much how the Old Testament closes.

The Jews spent the next 400 years looking for Elijah. So, of course, many fanciful stories, legends, urban myths, and such became popular with the people. The same thing happened with the signs of the coming of the Christ/the Messiah. Many in the crowd were looking for a military style leader, because that was what many of them wanted. The crowd will always be fascinated by the myth. The crowd will always seek to worship a god who does what the crowd likes. And nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd.

In questioning the disciples, Jesus asked two questions. “Who does the ‘crowd’ say that that Son on Man is?” As expected, the answers are all over the place. It is like trying to study theology by reading spiritually focused Facebook quotes. Bumper sticker theology doesn’t give you the fullness of what you need to confess your faith.

However, there is a place for it. I said earlier that we can **confess** God in completeness, certainty, and even simplicity. If there had been bumper stickers in Luther’s day, the “solas” would have been posted on the back of every Lutheran’s wagon. Sola Scriptura – scripture alone. Sola Fides – faith alone. Sola Gratia – grace alone. Sola Christi – Christ alone.

Those truths express a fullness of our faith in God, as long as our greater understanding of what we confess is behind those simple words. I have hundreds of books in my office library that speak of the nature, power, and persons of God. Yet, not one of them expresses a more clear presentation of the Gospel than that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, brought to you through Scripture alone.

I said before, Jesus asked two questions: “What does the crowd say?” Their answer is generally tainted by ignorance and confusion. But even if the crowd would give a good answer, the second question matters more. “Who do you say that I am?” No one can make a confession of faith for you. Who do you say that I am? God is not random or vague or completely unknowable. It is true that we cannot **explain** Him in a complete and certain sense. He is beyond our ability to comprehend. He stretches beyond the borders of the universe. However, we can **confess** Him and join Peter and say to Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Amen.