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The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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The Church Proclaims Jesus as Lord and Savior

In the next four weeks the appointed scripture readings focus on the work of the Church, the group of believers who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. In this first week of the new series, we remember that the Church is built on the rock of faith in Christ and that nothing, not even the gates of hell, can stand against the power and spread of the Savior's good news that sins are forgiven.

Sermon

Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Introduction - I'm sure you've noticed that the Church is in the news these days and the news isn't great. The great churches of western Christianity are slowly dying in Europe and America. The scriptural truth these churches confessed, the biblical morality they promoted, and the Christian ethics that influenced schools and businesses and politics are dying, too. Christians are worried; some Christians are almost frantic and they search for ways to preserve the faith they hold dear. We worry, too, and we wonder what life will be like for our children and grandchildren in a post-Christian world. The more we see and the more we hear, the less confident we are about the future of the Church. We may be less convinced than we used to be that the Church of Christ can be successful in our world unless something changes.

The Gospel for today tells us about time in Jesus' ministry when he and his disciples went off on a little retreat. The twelve disciples had been with Jesus for about a year and a half and so far, everything was going pretty well. There had been some ups and downs but most people were excited about Jesus, and the disciples were excited about Jesus, too. All that was about to change. Jesus took them on retreat to get them ready for what was coming. What he told them he also tells us and he helps us deal with the troubles and threats we see around us these days. We don't have to be afraid; we certainly don't need to be frantic. Just the opposite. The truth is

The Church of Christ Is Confident

Confident of its founder...Confident of its power...Confident of its mission

1. By the time Jesus headed off on retreat, he was in the news and the news was big. Nobody had ever seen the kind of miracles he was performing or heard sermons like he preached. But you know how this goes. The rumors start to fly and pretty soon there's more misinformation than truth. Jesus knew what was happening, but he wanted the disciples to come to grips with it. **He asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"**

They all chipped in. **Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.** There wasn't anything too surprising in this. There were rumors about John appearing after his beheading; even Herod the beheader worried about this. Malachi, the last Old Testament writer, wrote that Elijah would return before the great and dreadful day of the LORD. Jeremiah was a popular prophet and there were others. They were all powerful preachers. A lot people were counting on Jesus to be a powerful prophet who would drive the Romans out of Palestine and restore the glories of Israel.

So then the critical question: **But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"** Peter confessed what the rest were thinking: **You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.** Everything these disciples had learned at home and in school for as long as they could remember came together in that answer. God had appointed and anointed his Son to reverse what happened in Eden. The seed of the woman was coming to crush Satan, not Caesar. Immanuel would be born of a virgin but not in a palace. The suffering servant was coming to bleed and die, not to destroy foreign armies. King David's greatest son would rule an invisible kingdom, not a country with borders and walls. Peter and the disciples had come to believe that Jesus was that Messiah.

Peter was absolutely right; what he believed and confessed was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That confession summarized who Jesus was and what he had come to do. The confession was the key; the confession was the critical issue. Jesus replied, **Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.** Trusting the truth about Jesus is what made Peter a rock man—Peter means rock—and trusting that truth does the same for every believer. Every man, woman, and child who believes the truth about Jesus is joined together in one holy Christian and apostolic church.

You and I are members of that Church and we're confident about the Savior who founded it. So why do so many churchgoers get scared? Why the handwringing? Why so frantic? Maybe it's because they expect Jesus to do what he never intended to do. Jesus came to earth to save people from sin, not to make people obey. He didn't come to attack the Caesars of our society. He isn't interested in controlling our schools or making business honest or setting agendas for congress. Jesus doesn't overrule our courts. Jesus came to give his life for us, not to force his life on us. He came to soothe sinners, not to smother them. He came to comfort people who repent, not to control people who won't repent. We can't expect Jesus to do what he never promised he would do. Jesus is not John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. He is not a legislator or a crusader or an innovator. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son God sent to forgive sins, destroy Satan, and secure a place for us in heaven. When we have confidence in the Savior who founded the Church, who built the Church on the truth about his mission, then the Church of Christ is confident.

2. So are we pretty well stuck with the way things are these days? Do we have to watch churches go down the tube? It depends on your perspective. Jesus never promised that churches would last forever. Some churches burn down and sometimes their members burn up with them. Some churches fold up and their members scatter. Some churches give in to false teachers and their members lose the faith. Just like sin attacks people, so sin attacks churches. But when it comes to the Church of believers, the church that stands on the words and works of Jesus--well, listen to what Jesus said. **On this rock, on this truth, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.** Nothing can stop the truth about Jesus. Can death? No; Jesus can raise the dead. Can Satan? No; Jesus defeated Satan and chained him in hell. Can sin? No; Jesus took care of sin when all was finished on Good Friday. The truth about Jesus is a battering ram which no force of evil can stand up against. Nothing and no one can stop water and Word from bringing a baby into the family of God. Nothing and no one can stop bread and wine from becoming the body and blood of Christ to forgive sins. Nothing and no one can stop the Holy Spirit from turning a cynical mind into a believing heart.

Jesus doesn't proclaim the good news in winds and earthquakes and fires. He does his work with gentle, quiet whispers. We don't always see the battles the gospel mounts against evil. But sometimes we do. 3,000 people were baptized on Pentecost. I communed in a church service in Zambia where the host was served from a paper plate and the wine was poured from a plastic cup but the body and blood of Christ were there to comfort a

hundred African believers. I can remember when our synod supported one seminary built in Mequon. Today we support seminaries in Zambia and Vietnam and Hong Kong and other places and their graduates are proclaiming the gospel to thousands. When we get discouraged and worry about the future of the Christian Church, we need to look beyond America where people have grown tired of the truth about Jesus. We need to look to the world where the eternal gospel is being proclaimed **to every nation, tribe, language, and people**. When we understand that power, the Church of Christ is confident.

3. When Jesus took his disciples on that retreat, he knew what was ahead. Suffering was ahead, rejection was ahead, death ahead and their fear was ahead. Despite their resolve on this retreat, they all forsook him and fled when he walked to the cross. But Easter was ahead, too, and so was his ascension, and so was their mission to take the truth about Jesus into the world. Not yet, but soon. And so Jesus said, **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven**. These twelve followers of Jesus and every follower of Jesus who would follow them, had in their hands and in their hearts the truth about Jesus. That truth would change hearts and bring people into the family of God. That truth would also infuriate hearts and people would reject the family of God. The followers of Jesus announce that truth: trust in Jesus and live forever; reject Jesus and burn forever. That is the truth I preach and that is the truth you share. And that is the truth that Jesus stands behind. When we speak that truth honestly, Jesus is speaking the same truth. When I forgive your sins in worship, Jesus is saying the same thing. When you forgive a sorry child or a repentant friend, Jesus is saying the same thing. And when you warn an arrogant friend or family member of the disasters of hell, Jesus is standing with you nodding his head in agreement. This is our mission; this is what Jesus has called us to do. And when we carry our mission out, the Church of Christ is confident.

I don't blame anyone for worrying that the churches are in trouble these days. But when we think about the Church of Christ, we need to take the long view and the wider perspective. We have the message, the truth about Jesus who lived and died and rose again that we might live forever. The message has phenomenal power which sometimes we see and sometimes we don't see. And we have our mission, to proclaim and share the truth as Jesus calls us to proclaim and share it. Keep that in mind as member of the Church Christ and you will be confident. Amen.