

Matthew 16:13-18

### Words of Faith Words of Life

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 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. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.

Today is Palm Sunday but for three of you it is more than a regular Palm Sunday. It is your Confirmation Sunday, a day that once was and still should be a revered Lutheran tradition. Some churches have pictures of Confirmation classes on their walls that go back as many as 100 years. This was once a day filled with much honor and a lot of nervousness. Some adults here today could tell you stories of the pastor questioning them in front of the whole congregation for what seemed hours and reciting massive amounts of memorized statements from the Small Catechism and parts of the Bible and even hymn verses. It was a tradition of a spring Sunday, churches packed with relatives who traveled miles to be with the confirmands on their special day. Parents and baptism sponsors, grandparents and friends would be straining to hear their child's voice as they affirmed the baptismal vow their sponsors and parents had made for them when they were just little babies. It is really a day for you to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

In Jesus' day people had much to say about Jesus. Some recognized his power and believed in him as the one sent to rescue Israel, the Messiah for whom they all longed. Others were critical and skeptical of him and tried to trap him. He drew a lot of attention and people had many answers to that question. Some today imagine Jesus as the one to solve all of life's problems, the great spiritual Tylenol for whatever pain we suffer. The one who will save us from whatever it is that troubles us this week.

Some say Jesus is a great healer who acts through some charismatic personality's hands. Some TV evangelists marketing Jesus from elaborate TV sets, dispensing healing and miracles in direct proportion to the donations sent in. Do a Google search on the Internet for Jesus and you will find 11.7 million hits. Some see Jesus as the Mr. Fix it of the spiritual world, rewarding with riches, removing pain, suffering and hardship if we only pray hard enough. Some see Jesus as an all powerful answer man, and they wait for the right word to apply so that all discomfort will disappear.

God promises comfort and peace for sure but these are attained with different words. The story of Jesus in the Bible is not one of great prosperity and materialistic reward. It is instead a story of the true Son of God's suffering and death. Good Friday is a story of failure, weakness, suffering and death on a cross. This is the story of one who died for the

unlovely and the unlovable and whose body was pierced with nails and spear for you and me. But Jesus did not stop there. To the cross he added resurrection. To failure he added words for you and me, the message that we heard at our baptism, "you are chosen, you are my child, and you are the one I love."

God's words for us today are words of hope and victory in the midst of failure, weakness, suffering and death. We are loved no matter what, and we will never be forsaken.

This Confirmation day is a day of words. As confirmands you will speak words of commitment, affirmation, hope, and celebration. We as pastor, parents, God-parents, relatives and friends will say or at least mouth the words with you.

Today we remember the words spoken by parents and sponsors at your baptism. That day they and the whole congregation spoke for you, making promises to bring you up in the church so you can reach this day and you can speak the words of commitment for yourself. These words will help direct and guide you as you live as God's people into the future. These words are your promise:

- to live among God's faithful people
- to hear his Word and share his supper
- to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
- to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus,
- and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth

This is mature faith and mature Christian faith is a tall order. These are promises, which are beyond the ability of any of us to fulfill on our own. These are proud promises today, yet promises which we as adults know are hard to keep. Promises like those of Peter who said, "I'll never deny you!" yet did three times. Promises like those of James and John, "Let us sit at your right and your left" without any idea of what that would mean for them.

Yet words when spoken in the light of God's acceptance and forgiveness make our keeping of these promises true possibility and future reality. Words bringing with them the promise of forgiveness readily available for all of us to try again when we fail to live up to our confirmation promises.

Each of us and you too depend on the words we learned in the meaning of the Creed. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith."

Jesus speaks words for us today. God's victory is not seen in power, wealth and lack of suffering. God's victory comes in spite of, and in the very presence of failure, pain, suffering and death. The good news for you as a confirmed member of Christ's body and also for the rest of us is that Jesus will build his church with people like us who don't have it all together. People like Peter and like you and me who have great intentions but often can't or won't quite follow through.

These are words for adults who struggle to remain faithful, yet fail. For us as parents and friends who hear the promises made today knowing how difficult they are to keep. There are words for young people making promises today without knowing the future. These words show that we trust not in ourselves but that God will be with you in that future to guide and comfort and support all you do in Jesus' name. These are Words for all of us today as we again confess our faith in the midst of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus' words for us today assure us that we are loved, we are forgiven and we are accepted.

You stand before the altar today making your promise and looking into the future. Some of us remember our Confirmation day and see how the future has unfolded for us since then and praise God for where he has led us. Whenever we imagine the future there is some fear and worry. We never know for sure what the future will hold.

But we also look into the future knowing we are children of God. We live in the assurance of the power of the Holy Spirit, which can and will give us power to live with the uncertainty and fear that the future will bring. We know that we are connected, we are forgiven and it is enough. And when you read or hear those words from Jesus' lips, "Who do you say that I am?" May you today and in your old age be able to confidently and assuredly respond, "You are the Christ (my Savior), the son of the living God".