

***“Confession and Forgiveness”***

Normally, when we use the term, “confession” we use it in relation to forgiveness, and we mean that process whereby we bring before God (or another person) an admission of what we have done that is wrong. We confess our shortcomings, our failures, our faults. We are right to do so. We need to unburden our hearts and minds of those things that, left unattended, will only continue to hurt us, haunt us, and harass us.

The term, “confess” comes from the Latin word *confitete*, “to admit.” We use it in another sense in the Church— to talk about a common expression of faith. We “confess” the Creeds — that is, we admit together what we hold in common as our understanding of what is, or ought to be, the teaching of the faith.

Today we hear such a confession from St. Peter, who up this point has been known as Simon. So important is this event that the church has set aside a day in the Church Year to commemorate it — January 18. As you read St. Matthew’s Gospel, you discover how important is this statement of faith: it is the very core of that Gospel.

That is true both theologically and textually; it is, quite literally, the center of Matthew’s Gospel. If you tabulate all the verses in Matthew’s narrative, and count them from front and back toward the center, you will arrive at chapter 16, verse 16 (you can try this in your English Bible, and it may be off a tad, but if you do it in Greek, that is where you will arrive: at Peter’s confession). I don’t think that is a coincidence; I think Matthew purposefully intended that this statement of faith by Simon is to be regarded as the center of what it means to be the Church and what it means to be a Christian. Indeed, in Matthew’s Gospel, the only people who are identified by the term “disciple” are people who have made such a statement of faith about Jesus.

So this confession of faith is also at the heart of Matthew’s Gospel theologically; that is to say, it is at the heart of who we are and what we

are to be about.

To be a Christian is to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I suppose we all know that — I would like to think that we all do. But do we all let it be the reality that shapes and guides us? Is the confession a matter of intellectual assent, but not one of daily impact? Or to put it another way: Do we regard this confession of faith as an end-point, or a beginning-point? Do we see this as the terminus of our spiritual journey — that we have “arrived” once we have come to that confession? Or, do we see it as the point from which everything else in life springs — that, having made that confession, we have just begun the spiritual pilgrimage because we have entered into coming to terms with the truth?

One way to tell is to look at Jesus' reaction to what Simon says. There is first a word of benediction: ***“Simon, son of Jonah, you are favored indeed!”*** Robin Mattison correctly identifies what is happening here in her commentary of this pericope: *“Jesus joyfully remarked that Peter had been blessed by God because the Father revealed to him that Jesus was both Messiah and Son. So, the ‘rock’ on which Jesus built the church was Peter’s reception of God’s revelation and not a human revelation.”*

Anyone who receives such divine revelation is blessed, just in knowing Jesus and admitting to that truth, AND, Jesus seems also to be saying that NOW Peter can be used by Jesus in a way he could never have been used before he came to this understanding. That says to me that, for Peter, this confession was not an ending, but a beginning. Oh, it must be a goal toward which we are guiding people and, in that sense, it may be regarded as an end-point. But it is not THE end; it is not a completed journey once we have come to that confession.

A noted scholar once raised this question: *“How would you know if you were indeed a person in whom there is faith? What sign do you need that leads you to understand that you trust the promises of God?”* And he answered himself: *“How else but through your obedience in doing works — in responding to God’s grace by doing that for which you have been gifted and called by God?”*

There is a follow-up question that I cannot fully explore today, but feel I must at least raise: “*Which works?*” Or, to look at it from another angle: Who determines what works— what behaviors, actions, activities — will give proof that we have responded to God’s grace in faith?

I could say: “*Well, I have never beaten up one single little old lady in my entire life.*” or “*I do not sadistically pull the wings off flies.*” or “*There was never a time when I engaged in debauchery or licentiousness (I’m, not even sure I know that those are!).*” All of those have the unfortunate characteristic of being negative, that is, they are things that we refrain from doing. There are hosts of people who think that is what defines a person of faith — what you don’t do: “*We don’t smoke and we don’t chew and we don’t go with girls who do.*”

Is that the center of the Christian faith? We can sense that it is not; our longing is that it must be more than that. So we discern that it must be some pious actions that constitute what our faith is all about.

But then: “*Mr. Jones, he went to church, he went there every Sunday; But when he died, he went to hell for what he did on Monday.*” What did Mr. Jones do that was so bad? Lie, cheat, and steal? No. He dared to think that he was the arbiter of what is right and wrong, beneficial and harmful, salutary and detrimental — that indeed his was the final word on what it meant to live in response of God’s grace.

Jesus give us a cue in today’s Gospel where we will find the key to what works we should be about that will define for us where faith is or is not dwelling. It is within the context of our relationships, and whether or not we are willing to exercise His forgiveness there.

This is much tougher than it sounds. There is, first of all, our own wounded feelings to overcome, and that is not easy to do, especially when it feels so delicious to lick our wounds and plot our revenge. Then, there is all around us a message not to get mad, but to get even — a message that is driven home again and again in our television exposure, in the ways other people seem to treat us, on bumper stickers, in the

messages of politicians. Forgiveness! That's for sissies, wimps, and losers.

Even when we get past those barriers, forgiveness is hard business. Made all the harder by Jesus' commission in today's Gospel: "**... whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**" We need to be careful that we don't make this sound as if we go into executive session to make a determination for all time and all places as to what will be considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior in our eyes. Jesus here is not saying that we get to set the standards for permissible actions; but that we have the awesome power to forgive, and the equally awesome power to not forgive. How we will use that power will define what, for us, it really means to be a person of faith.

Who get your forgiveness? Somebody who never hurts you, never wrongs you, never has need to say you, "*I'm sorry.*"? Ridiculous! So who does get your forgiveness — someone with whom you have a problem? Gee, Pastor — duh! No, not so "duh!" That's who needs your forgiveness . . . who gets it? Only those who ask? Or is it beg? Or is it plead? Or maybe it's those who pay!

We who, with Simon, confess Jesus Christ as Son and Messiah know the reality of forgiveness — but all too often we forget (or conveniently ignore) the reason why we need it. In so forgetting, we blind ourselves to the stark reality of how undeserved that forgiveness is. When we forget our need and our unworthiness, we are inclined to hoard our forgiveness away from others. When we fully acknowledge how lavishly and freely we have been forgiven, we are more inclined to spread that forgiveness around.

The true work of faith, therefore, is to be found in the lavishness of our forgiveness to others that comes because we have confessed that Jesus is our Messiah and Savior. That means we have recognized our great need for such a Messiah and Savior, because there is no way we can work this out for ourselves.

Having admitted such a need, we are more inclined to accept those who are at the same level of need — not if because of identical deeds, thoughts, or words, then because of the same poverty of spirituality. If we are all stuck in this morass of sin and, if the only way out is forgiveness and, if Jesus has placed the awesome power of forgiveness into our hands, how can we even think to withhold from any person the forgiveness we have to give and that they so desperately need?

If we do — even if we think of doing so — our confession faith is hollow. If Jesus is Messiah and Savior, then He is the ONLY Messiah and Savior there is (which, often to my chagrin, I am forced to admit it cannot be me). If there is salvation to be found nowhere else, then we bind people to an eternity of hopelessness if we neglect to bring that Savior's salvation to bear in their lives.

The up side to all this is that we have joyous, indeed giddy, outrageously rapturous Good News to share. In Christ, God has set the whole world free from the bondage to sin. How we can turn that into a message for only some people some of the time, I just don't comprehend. Yet, I do understand it, because I know my own predisposition to withhold forgiveness until I think the other person "deserves" it.

So I — with you — need to regain a new vision every day of the connection between our confession and our wielding of this awesome power. If Jesus truly is Messiah and Savior, then forgiveness must be lavish and free — especially because nobody "deserves" it. I don't deserve; nor do you; nor does that jerk who cut you off in traffic; nor the person with thirty items clogging up the "12 items or less" lane at the supermarket; nor the coworker who took credit for your idea; nor the owner of the dog who makes a daily "visit" to your lawn; nor anyone else we encounter this week, next week, next month, in twenty years.

None of us "deserves" forgiveness. Ah, but when we have it, then it can truly be said of us as Jesus said of Peter, "***Blessed are you.***" Even more blessed when we share it.

Amen.