

James 3:1-12

Confession

Mark 8:27-38

September 15, 2024

We are in the middle of the, “Time After Pentecost,” which means our attention is directed towards the questions regarding life in the spirit, or the spiritual life. We run across scripture texts that both encourage and challenge us, and are comforted by the knowledge that God is found in the messiness of life, and would not bother to challenge us unless the intention is our redemption, the development of our character, the salvation of our souls.

There are many topics that might come under consideration; daily life concerns, marriage, parenting, financial management, vocation, citizenship, and many others.

The topic for this day is *confession*. All three of the texts we have heard or recited together refer to it in one way or another. The first text is the 19th Psalm which we experienced as a responsive reading in the Call to Worship. It starts out with a declaration, a confession,

“the heavens declare God’s glory . . .” and ends with a prayer about our declarations, our witness, our confession of faith, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

And there is the great text from James about the power of the tongue, this tiny organ that brings both blessings and curses, “with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.” It has been the wishful hope of the human race down through time that the words we say would not turn out to be that important. I am sure you have heard, “actions speak louder than words.” And there is a truth to that statement. But we are not so easily let off the hook for our loose speech. For from the inner person, the mouth speaks.

And then, of course, there is the more particular confession, that of Peter in Caesaria Philippi upon the simple yet demanding question from Jesus, “who do you say that I am?” That is the great question of all our lives. And the answer, spoken by Peter, who gave us the words of the response, “*You are the Christ.*”

Thankfully, God has spoken, and has revealed what is the substance of the divine inner life. And more than any other manner by which God has been made known, we are confronted with Jesus, crucified and risen. Jesus is who God is. Crucified and Risen, is what God has done.

Thus the importance of Peter’s confession, and also the importance of words, the words we use to make ourselves known. Like it our not, with everything we do or say, we confess to the world what is in our hearts, the deepest and truest convictions we have, and the substance of who we are. *Our lives* bear

witness. Sometimes, if you are like me, you are not too pleased with what is revealed.

It is grace that we are able to say anything at all, even that Peter was able to answer, even though in terms of our experience, the path to confession seems wholly of our own making. It seems there is within us a true self, not the one we reveal on the outside, but our inner self, a self that desires to know truth, and be true; a self that is willing to be convinced if encountered by God in grace and mercy and righteousness.

One that is willing to read the hard words of the demands of discipleship, neither fearing them nor watering them down by failing to acknowledge their weight.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it (never have truer words been written). 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

More often than not, when we hear the word, “confession,” especially in a religious setting, we are

prone to think of it in association with sin, and with the hoped for forgiveness. We confess our sins. Related is the idea of confession in a legal setting, where the necessity of a trial and very contentious debate, to be decided by a judge or a jury, is avoided if the accused admits, or confesses, their guilt. Certainly, this understanding of what confession means is legitimate and helpful. There is a great deal of spiritual benefit in making confession of sin to God.

Yet here in Mark’s gospel there is something different happening. Another content for the idea of confession is presented. It is alluded to in religious or theological documents such as the Westminster Confession, which is Presbyterian, or the London Confession, used by Baptists, which refers not to a confession of the sins we have committed, but a statement of the substance of our faith. It is a declaration of what we believe. That is what Peter is confessing.

So let us think of it in that way. What do we believe about Jesus? The first thing Peter says is that Jesus is the Christ, the one God has anointed, for that is what a christening is, an anointing. The Christening itself *is* the cross.

In some traditions, yesterday day was the Festival of the Holy Cross. In Scotland it is called, “Holyrood,” which means, “sacred pole,” and is a reference to the cross. There is a big hill in Edinburgh that is named after it. I climbed it while I was there. At the bottom of the hill is a palace, the official home of the royal family when they are in town, that is also named after it.

The festival itself commemorates the Feast of St. Helena, who by tradition, was on pilgrimage in Jerusalem when she discovered the cross of Jesus and also of the two thieves. Helena was the mother of Constantine, the first Roman emperor to embrace the Christian faith. I am not sure I trust that history, but I do appreciate any attempt to focus attention on the cross of Jesus.

We all know that famous line from the first chapter of First Corinthians, in which Paul presents the cross as either a stumbling block or a folly, and says it is the central feature of his preaching. He speaks of what it means that God chose the world's foolishness and weakness rather than the world's wisdom and strength, as a means of accomplishing redemption.

It has always made more sense to believe that God acts in the same manner as the world, siding with wisdom and strength rather than folly and weakness. We are faced with the same question, "what do we say about Jesus? Who do we confess Him to be?" Let us be careful in our answer lest we fail to distinguish between what we would like to say we believe, and what we actually *do* believe as *our lives bear witness*.

We can sense the truth about ourselves in the story that continues from Peter's confession. Jesus immediately taught them about the cross, about his own rejection and failure and death. We are told that he spoke plainly about these things. And the response? Peter took him aside and began to rebuke

him. In other words, though this cross theology is in vogue to proclaim, in reality it is hard to take.

Jesus is the Christ - Jesus, the poor craftsman from the little Galilean village whose life would culminate in an unjust criminal execution . . . *is* the anointed one, prepared by God from the foundation of the world, to redeem the world. And the redemption comes, not in spite of the cross, but *because* of the cross. The cross of Jesus *is* our redemption.

So let us confess it along with Peter, and in confessing believe, just as in believing we confess, "Thou art the Christ!" This declaration is what we believe. This confession is *who we are*.

We are committed to an ethic of love and acceptance, service and sacrifice; to the conviction that earthy pleasures; power, wealth, success even, are not the sources of meaning and fulfillment in life; to the belief in the value of *every person in the sight of God*; and to a firm belief in forgiveness, not only as something we have received from God, but as something we also direct towards others. In other words, that mercy triumphs over judgment. We are committed to a belief in the victory of life and light over death and darkness.

We confess it with our mouths, *and* with how we live our lives. In this world in which there is disillusionment with religious things and anxiety about the future, let our faith in this confession be *strong*, in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, no matter the direction of the world's life.

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