

Matthew 10:5a, 21-33
"Acknowledging Christ Before Men"
Pentecost 4 (Proper 7A)

June 25, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus said, ***"So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven"*** (Matthew 10:32-33).

In last week's Gospel lesson, Jesus sent out His apostles into a hostile world to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In preparation for today's words, Jesus makes it clear that because of their proclamation, the apostles will be persecuted and hated. But Jesus doesn't just leave them there. If He would, who would want to be a follower of Christ if all that happened is that you would be persecuted and hated by all?

So, Jesus continues today as He encourages His apostles. And what Jesus says to them, He also says to us, because being a follower of Christ is not easy, despite what some may say. Because of our association and faith in Christ, there is no neutral ground, but only a hostile world. We see division among our families. We face rejection and persecution, which will not end until Christ returns. As Christ's disciples, we expect to be like Him, including the opposition that He faced during His earthly ministry. But all the while, Jesus encourages us to acknowledge Him before men, promising that He will acknowledge us before the Father.

But what does it mean to truly acknowledge Jesus? I acknowledge my neighbor by tipping my hat to him, or by waving to him when I pass by in the car. Is that what Jesus means? Does He mean that I must notice Him?

In the WWE today, there is a wrestler named Roman Reigns who begs the crowd each week saying, "Acknowledge me!" Week after week, Reigns just wants to be honored for his accomplishments, as he has defeated every challenger along the way to being the Undisputed WWE Universal World Heavyweight Champion for more than 1,000 days. As he speaks, "Acknowledge me," the crowds erupt to cheers and boos. Is Jesus begging us to notice Him?

What does Jesus mean when He says, ***“Everyone who acknowledges Me before men”***? Well, first off, the word “acknowledge” used here from the ESV is rather weak. That word comes from the Greek word “homologeō,” which means “to confess one’s faith, declare publicly, or acknowledge.” Acknowledge works, but “to confess” is much stronger. In fact, traditionally the word “confess” was used here. And this is where we get the word for those who suffered for the faith known as “confessors.” They all may not have died a martyr’s death, but they all suffered for their Lord by refusing to deny Him.

But one thing to further note here is that Jesus is not advocating a theology of “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.” What Jesus is saying here is a gracious promise, but is also a stern warning.

Jesus says, ***“A disciple is not above His teacher, nor a servant above his master”*** (Matthew 10:24). So, we confess that Jesus is our Lord and Master. We don’t actively ignore Him and His Word. We follow Him and His Word.

So, what are we confessing about Jesus? Are we confessing that Jesus was just a great moral teacher? Are we confessing that Jesus’ life was a great example in showing how we are to live and die? No, what we confess is the whole Christ as is proclaimed in the Scriptures. This is why it is so important that we recite the Creeds in the Divine Service. We confess that Jesus is truly and fully God and Man. We confess that Jesus is the Creator of heaven and earth. We confess that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was born of the virgin Mary. We confess that Jesus is our redeemer and Savior who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. We confess that Jesus rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, and that He has all power and all authority. We confess that Jesus will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead.

So, what are we afraid of? Why are we not shouting the one true Christian faith from the housetops? Why are we so often tempted to shrink back from our Lord and deny Him?

Jesus says, ***“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell”*** (Matthew 10:28). In the Creeds, which are all found in the Scriptures, we confess that the Triune God – *the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* – is mightier than all of our enemies – human and demonic combined.

So, why is it that we so often tend to fear people and their reactions so much, and we tend to fear God too little? We all need to hear Jesus tell us that ***“even the hairs on your head are all numbered”*** (Matthew 10:30). We need to hear how God preserves us and takes us to life eternal by confessing Him to men.

Now, you may be saying to yourself, “Am I doomed? As much as I want to tell others about Christ, I keep my mouth shut, since I’m afraid of what others may say about me.” Well, you are not doomed. God forgives your sins, including the failure to confess Christ boldly to others through words and deeds. Through His Holy Spirit, God renews our faith, so that we are granted greater courage.

Just look at the Apostle Peter. On the night of the arrest of Jesus, Jesus said to Peter, ***“Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times”*** (Matthew 26:34). To that statement, Peter responded, ***“‘Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!’ And all the disciples did the same”*** (Matthew 26:35).

As Jesus stood before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, Peter was outside in the courtyard warming his hands over a fire while a servant girl came up to him and said, ***“‘You also were with Jesus the Galilean”*** (Matthew 26:69). Three times, Peter denied knowing Jesus as he said, ***“I do not know what you mean”*** (Matthew 26:70), ***“I do not know the man”*** (Matthew 26:72), and then he swore again saying, ***“I do not know the man”*** (Matthew 26:74). Peter denied Jesus before men. And his denial was extremely serious as he not only abandoned his faith, but he also publicly renounced his faith. As that rooster crowed, Peter was completely miserable. He knew what he had done and what his denials meant.

For each of those three denials, following His death and bodily resurrection, Christ forgave Peter. He forgave Peter in the locked upper room and for added comfort, He forgave Peter again following the miraculous catch of 153 large fish from the Sea of Tiberias saying three times, ***“Simon, son of John, do you love Me”*** (John 21:15-17). Jesus concluded saying to Peter, ***“Follow Me”*** (John 21:19).

Jesus uses the examples of sparrows and hairs on our head to demonstrate the enormity of God’s love for us. This love was most powerfully demonstrated when the Father sent His only begotten Son. Christ Jesus fearlessly and loudly proclaimed the kingdom of God, despite insults and taunts. He worked and spoke as long as there was daylight. He courageously walked to Calvary, where His body was nailed to the cross – as were our sins. The One who judges justly raised Him to life again. Christ now has the keys of death and hell, and has opened heaven’s gates for us.

Now, don't think, "Whoever once denies Me before men," but "Whoever persists in denying Me before men." So, the only people who will be denied by Jesus are those who publicly persist in denying Him as Master and Lord. To deny Jesus is to persist in rejecting Him as *"the Way, the Truth, and the Life"* (John 14:6) who brings us to God the Father.

So, if Peter can be forgiven for denying Jesus, so can you! Remember what we also confessed this morning? *"If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness; therefore You are feared"* (Psalm 130:3-4). In our pious fear and faith, Christ gives us courage through His Means of Grace in that He alone has the power to forgive our sins, so that we can confess Him before men as the only Savior of the world!

Being forgiven, Peter went on to confidently confess Jesus before all men, saying, *"Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified"* (Acts 2:36). Despite his suffering, he no longer feared men. He knew that it was foolish to be afraid of men. He knew that the world and its prince Satan is not the judge. He trusted in Jesus, who is the only One who can cast both soul and body into hell. He trusted that Jesus would confess him, just as Jesus confesses all who acknowledge Him in heaven before the Father, the Church Triumphant, and the angels.

Isn't it amazing that Jesus would – and He does – speak of you before the Father? He preaches of everyone who confesses Him as Lord and Christ.

Sometimes confessing our Lord before other people does complicate things. People may ridicule us as Christians, avoid us, and even harm us. But thanks be to God, that when we confess Him, He also confesses us, this Jesus who has rescued us from the powers of sin, eternal death, and Satan. Christ protects us in this world that attempts to destroy us, but it can't, since we confess Jesus as our Savior, God, and Lord. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +