

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
August 25, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

How Blessed We Are to Know Who Jesus Is!

1. We're Enlightened
2. We're Secure
3. We're the agents of God

Matthew 16:13-20

Matthew 16:13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 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. 19 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." 20 Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God,

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis addressed the inclination to say nice things about Jesus, but to stop short of calling him God. He wrote, "I am here trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any of that patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. Nor did he intend to." [*Mere Christianity*, MacMillan, 1943, p. 55-56]

Lewis's quote comes to mind because when Jesus asked his disciples what people thought about his identity, their answers were, in a way, favorable. Many people were doing Jesus the "high honor" of saying that he was a great prophet, like John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. But as favorable as those comparisons may have been, they all stopped short of really recognizing Jesus for who he was. Jesus was (and is) greater than Elijah and John and Jeremiah. As it says in the opening verses of Hebrews, "***In the past God spoke***

to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

By God’s grace, Simon Peter understood this. When asked by Jesus for his personal confession, he declared to Jesus, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” We share Peter’s faith. Just a few minutes ago we confessed, “I believe in Jesus Christ, (God’s) only Son, our Lord.” And many of us learned in confirmation class to say, “**I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord.**” [Luther’s *Small Catechism*, The Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed]

There is no doubt that Jesus would respond to our confession just as he responded to Peter’s confession: “Blessed are you!” This morning I’d like to explore with you some of the blessings that come to us because by God’s grace we know who Jesus is.

1. We’re Enlightened

The first blessing that comes with knowing who Jesus really is can be called enlightenment. When Simon Peter uttered his famous confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus replied, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.*” How was it that Peter could confess that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, and the true Son of God, while others were still content to call Jesus a prophet? The answer is divine revelation. The answer is enlightenment. God the Father did this. He used the words and works of Jesus—and the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah—to illuminate for Peter the truth that Jesus was no mere prophet, but the divine Savior whose coming the prophets foretold.

God the Father has brought us to this same blessed certainty. Whether the darkness of unbelief was chased from our hearts through Holy Baptism when we were just days old, or whether our conversion to the Christian faith took place after we’d spent a good many years on this earth, we are now enlightened as to the true identity of Jesus. Instead of groping about in the darkness of ignorance and fear, we say with certainty, “Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” God worked through the good news about Jesus in the Bible to bring life and immortality to light for us and all who share this faith. This was a stunning miracle, a wonder of such power that the apostle Paul compares it to what God did on the first day of creation. He writes, “**For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.**” (2 Cor. 4:6)

I know that claiming to be enlightened is not in keeping with the spirit of our times. What’s more in vogue is to claim that we’re all seekers, looking for our own light, laying claim, at best, to just a corner of the truth—if there is such a thing as truth. But notice that Peter didn’t say to Jesus, “Well, this is just one man’s opinion, but from what I can see from my limited perspective, you have all the earmarks that would lead me to say you might possibly be the Messiah.” Jesus praised Peter for his *bold* confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Don’t let anyone talk you out of the certainty that

God the Father has worked in you! By the mercy of God, it has been revealed to us that Jesus is God's Son and our Savior. That enlightenment allows us to live in certainty, rather than doubt and fear.

Did you happen to see the face of the fellow who came up with the ball Barry Bonds hit out of the park for his 600th career home run? His face was bloodied by some deep scratches. As his story goes, these were wounds inflicted on him as he tried to hang on to his precious catch. As the other side of the story goes, these were wounds he suffered as he was taking the home run ball away from the fellow who originally caught it. In other words, there's allegedly the possibility that someone else caught home run ball #600, but had it taken away from him. Could that happen to us in the spiritual sense? Could someone deprive us of something far more precious than a baseball? Could we be deprived of our saving faith in Christ? Jesus provides a comforting answer to that question as he continues to respond to Simon Peter's bold confession.

2. We're Secure

How is your security quotient right now? No worries? If so, that's a minority opinion. As the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks grows closer, and with each successive report of the continued activities of *Al Qaida*, Americans grow more apprehensive that further terrorists acts could be just around the corner. Even the children's page in the Saturday edition of the *Bee* decided to broach the topic of terrorism and the 9/11 anniversary. And then there's the fact that the Dow Jones had been diving like a bungee jumper. Those who were depending on their investments to fund their twilight years are just hoping it bounces back. What was that about feeling secure? The fact is, people lose precious things every day—their life's savings, yes, and maybe also their lives.

Now consider the fact that by God's gracious enlightening, we possess something more precious than high-yielding investment portfolio, more precious even than life itself. We have life eternal, ours through faith in Jesus, who covered all our sins with the blood he shed at the cross. We have, through faith in Jesus, the holiness without which no one can see the Lord. We have immortality. And Satan hates that we have it. He rages against it every day. He plots continually to try to take it away from us. We're marked men (and women and children). It is an established fact that Satan, who has marked his prey, is plotting to deceive us. He's a pragmatist; he'll use whatever works. He's clever; he knows just where we're weak. He's persistent; he doesn't give up easily. What was that again about feeling secure?

But listen to what Jesus promises here: *"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 wouldn't blame you if you said, "I'll feel more secure if I know what 'this rock' is." If, as some believe, the rock is Simon Peter, then I wouldn't blame you for continued feelings of insecurity. Simon's nickname, Peter, may mean "rock," but more than once he proved that he was subject to failures of faith just like the rest of us. Early in his relationship with Jesus, he resisted taking instructions on how to catch fish from a landlubber like Jesus. Then, when he caught a mess of fish, he said, **"Go away from me, Lord. I am a**

sinful man.” Just a couple of weeks ago here in church we heard how Peter’s faith failed him as he was walking on the water at the Sea of Galilee. And I don’t need to remind you that Peter denied Jesus at a pivotal moment just before the crucifixion.

The truth is that when Jesus says, “On this rock I will build my church,” he’s referring not to Peter, but to Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That understanding of Jesus’ words fits with the rest of Scripture. St. Paul told the Corinthians, “**No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.**” And to the Ephesians he said, “**You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (that is, Holy Scripture), with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.**” You don’t have worry that Peter can bear our weight. The object of our faith is Jesus Christ and he can bear the weight. All who build on Jesus Christ are secure. Satan will still try to separate us from God, but God has said to Satan, “So far you may go and no farther.” The devil may tempt us to discouragement and despair with troubles and loss. Satan may roar and stomp to frighten us, but this remains true, “**The gates of Hades (of hell) will not overcome Christ’s church.**” We know, then, just how close the fire will come, how far the floodwaters will rise. And they won’t overwhelm us. We’re secure in Christ.

But what are we to do with this wonderful security? Are we to spend our post-conversion lives inert, whiling away the days and years with earthbound pursuits as we wait until we’re *really* living? Jesus has more to say and it addresses this point. Far from still living under the command not to tell anyone that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord has made us his agents.

3. We’re the agents of God

Jesus went on speaking and said to Peter, “*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.*” To give someone the keys is to place trust in that person. We keep valuable things under lock and key, but none more valuable than this: the kingdom of heaven. This refers not to admission to heaven at some time in the future, but to membership in God’s kingdom right now through faith in Jesus who obtained for us the forgiveness of sins. Amazingly, Jesus says to Peter, I will give *you* the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Are we right back where we were when we wondered whether the church was built on Peter? The word “you” in the original language is singular. Jesus was speaking directly to Peter. Maybe the funny stories have it right: at the entrance to heaven stands Peter, the gatekeeper.

But let’s look at John 20. There we find Jesus, risen from the dead. He’s suddenly appeared in the midst of this frightened band of disciples, despite the fact that the doors were locked. He shows them the nail prints in his hands, and the wound in his side made by the soldier’s spear. Then he says to them, “**Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.**” (And here the “you” is plural.) Then Jesus breathes on his disciples and says to them, “**Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.**” In other words,

the same keys that Jesus gave to Peter, he gave to the rest of the apostles and to us through them.

We still use these keys today. I'm using the keys as I tell you this morning from this pulpit that your sins are all forgiven for Jesus' sake. Pastor Micheel used these keys when he declared to you earlier, "I forgive you all your sins." Why did he say "I forgive you"? Was it because of his seminary education? Was it an unwarranted grab for authority? No. It was because "the use of the keys is the special power and right which Christ gave to his church on earth: to forgive the sins of penitent sinners but refuse forgiveness to the impenitent as long as they do not repent." When you called him to be your pastor, when you called me to be your pastor, then you authorized us to say on your behalf what Christ has authorized us all to say: "Your sins are forgiven."

But you didn't divest yourself of all rights to use the keys when you called your pastors. In your personal life, as you speak with your family and your friends, your coworkers and acquaintances, you can still use the keys. You can assure those who are burdened by a weight of sin and guilt that through Jesus all our sins have been removed. Of course, there are also those times when proper spiritual care demands that we tell those who refuse to repent that their sins are not forgiven. But even this is designed to bring the unrepentant to repentance. What a blessing it is to be God's agents in transmitting this soul-saving message of forgiveness through Jesus Christ! The angels well might envy us.

In Psalm 16 King David wrote, "**The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.**" A modern paraphrase of the psalm puts it this way: "Is it any wonder that I am happy?" [*Psalms Now*, Leslie Brandt] That expression of joy is like our own as we think about what a blessing it is to know who Jesus really is. By God's mercy we live in a state of spiritual enlightenment. Though our spiritual enemy is strong and filled with venom, his limits have been firmly set by God. He cannot overcome the church or the individual believers who make up that church. Rather than just sitting quietly and experiencing these blessings, Jesus wants us to see that he's made us his agents and entrusted us with the keys of the kingdom. And all this so others can experience the blessing we enjoy—the blessing of knowing who Jesus really is. Amen.