

Text: Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV)

¹³When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴They 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?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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.” ²⁰Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Theme: The Strong Rock on which the Church Is Built

50 years ago last week Saturday on August 15, 1961 an event occurred that shaped the last half of the 20th century. It affected where I was born, and my father-in-law could always say that this important event occurred on his 30th birthday. The strange thing is that this important event at the time has been forgotten by many people today. It was the building of the Berlin Wall.

After World War 2 Berlin was divided into four sectors for the British, Americans, French, and Soviets. As communism began to take hold in the east, thousands of people migrated to the west. The East Germans denied that they intended to build a wall just a few days before it happened, but suddenly it was finished. All of West Berlin was encased by a wall, which was intended to keep the East Germans from fleeing to that part of the city. Eventually the “iron curtain” would divide eastern and western Europe. The situation at the time was so intense that my father and thousands of other national guardsmen were called up to active duty for a possible war against the Soviet Union. My father was sent to Ft. Lewis in Washington, which is where I was born.

That wall divided Europe for 28 years. Today that seems like a very short period; however at the time, people thought that it was impossible that this wall would ever come down. When President Reagan stood at the wall with his challenge, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” people laughed at him. The conventional wisdom was that this wall would never come down. But in November, 1989 the wall came down because of some confusion. Many people thought that the wall was going to open. They were pressing in from the East, and the chief border guard didn’t know what to do. Finally, without any orders, he just let the people through, and from that moment the wall had fallen.

There are many walls which are erected for safety in this world. Eventually, every one of them falls. But there is a mighty fortress, which we have as Christians. It is the Rock, that will stand forever. That rock is the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

I. It is tempting, however, to build our lives only partly on Jesus.

We see that in the ideas that people had about Jesus at that time. When Jesus asked the disciples what other people were saying about Him, they answered, “*Some say [that You are] John the Baptist; other say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*” They were saying complementary things about Jesus, but they didn’t have it quite right.

Today there are also many people who say complementary things about Jesus, but they don’t have it quite right either. They look at Him as a good person, a wise religious leader or a compassionate man. They might even respect others for their faith, but they do not look at Him as the rock on which they build their lives. Their lives are built on something else than Jesus Christ. Because of that one day, just like the Berlin Wall, it will all come crashing down. It doesn’t matter if what a person believes sounds religious or complementary toward Jesus. If their lives are not built on the confession of Christ as their Savior, they are building of a foundation that will not last.

II. The only sure Rock is the confession that Jesus is the Christ.

There are several examples of that solid confession in the Bible. Peter made it in our text. When Jesus asked the disciples, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Peter answered, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” Later Jesus Himself would make the same confession. When He stood before the Sanhedrin, the High Priest Caiaphas asked Him under oath, “*I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.*” The Lord answered, “*You have said so.*” There was the time in the courtyard when Peter denied his Lord, but when he stood before the Sanhedrin he also confessed, “*Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. There is salvation is no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*” (Acts 4:11) That confession would be made into the earliest symbol of Christianity, the fish. The Greek word for fish is “Ichthus.” Today acronyms have become very popular. The names of several organizations are acronyms. For instance WHO is the World Health Organization. We use acronyms when we text message. “LOL” means Laugh Out Loud.” The word Ichthus (fish) meant “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, our Savior.” The symbol of the fish is the confession of faith that Peter made in our text.



It is still what we confess today. Who do you say that Jesus is? When we read the Scriptures, we can come to no other conclusion than that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The Old Testament gives us the clues as to what the Savior would be like and what He would do. The New Testament shows us clearly that Jesus Christ fulfilled every one of the Old Testament prophecies, and that the final proof was His resurrection from the dead.

One of the best summaries of that confession is what Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, **I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most**

certainly true. When we are asked who Jesus is, our answer is also that “He is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” He is my Savior.

III. This confession brings two things.

The first is opposition. Jesus makes clear in our text that the gates of hell itself will attack those who confess Christ. When Jesus made His confession before the Sanhedrin, the High Priest tore his robes and condemned our Lord to death. When Peter made His confession before the Sanhedrin, he was commanded not to preach any more in Jesus’ name. When Stephan made his confession, he was stoned to death. Many of the early Christians were called martyrs. They were willing to give up their lives rather than give up their confession of Christ as their Savior. A good example of such a person was a pastor named Polycarp. In 155 he was on trial for being a Christian. The judge respected him and even urged him to save his life by cursing Christ, he replied: **"Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"** Shortly thereafter he was burned at the stake because of his faith.

Today we have many brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world who are undergoing such severe tests of their faith. Even in our country the devil never stops attacking those who confess Christ. He tries every trick that He can think of. Those tricks consist of false teaching, persecution, and a lukewarm faith which loves the things of this world more than our Savior. He never rests. He is always on the prowl for someone who attack.

But this confession also brings salvation. Jesus told Simon, *“You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”* Peter means a stone, the size of a building block. Jesus told him that this confession makes him a part of the church. He is a living stone. Together all of those who confess Christ are the rock which prevails against the devil and all the evil that he plots against us. We look very different. When I was a student in Germany, I traveled to East Germany on the other side of the Berlin Wall several times. It always impressed me was that despite all that might divide us, there was a wonderful unity which I had with the Christians who lived in that country in our confession of Christ as Lord. Last Sunday we celebrated the ordination of Pastor Gui. Their congregation worships in a much different style than we do. Yet, so many people from our congregation remarked to me what a wonderful service it was. What made is a marvelous day was our joint confession of Christ as Lord. There are many things that divide all of us, things like politics, age or tastes, but none of those things can divide those who hold to Christ as our Savior. Our confession of Him unites us, and it shields us from all the attacks of the devil. The devil cannot accuse us because in Christ we have the forgiveness of sins. The devil attacks us with suffering, but God works all things for our good. The devil has brought death into the world, but Christ has won eternal life. Our confession of Him as Savior is the rock that will never fail us now or for all of eternity.

Like the Berlin wall there are so many foundations on which societies and the lives of people have been built, but these all come crashing down. They are forgotten in the annals of history. But Christ is the strong rock on which His Church is built. His salvation is forever sure. May God always keep us in that one true Christian faith. Amen.

Pastor Don Hougard, Benediction Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI, August 21, 2011