

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

In Matthew's gospel, we get glimpses of who Jesus is throughout the entire story. Early on, we're told that he is "God with us." And throughout the gospel, we learn more about what that means in terms of God's love for us and God's commitment to the world. But in today's reading, things come to a head when Jesus asks the disciples a couple of questions.

In biblical times, Caesarea Philippi was a dangerous place to be for anyone who didn't go along with the ideals of the Roman Empire. It was near a trade route. There were buildings and temples dedicated to Roman leaders. And there were also sanctuaries and other places of devotion for the Greek god, Pan.

So, for their own safety, anyone there who was against Rome was encouraged to be quiet about it. That included not talking about who Jesus was and the things he was doing.

So, as Jesus and the disciples approached that city, the questions he asked makes it sound like he was trying to trap them. But Jesus knew that, despite the political situation, people had been talking about him. And he assumed that the disciples had joined in at least a few of those conversations.

So, he wanted to know, "Who are you saying that I am?" In other words, "What are you saying about me behind my back?" When Peter answered, he spoke the truth with such certainty that Jesus blessed him and named his confession as the foundation upon which the church would be built.

In his declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, Peter identified not only who Jesus is, but also who he is. Meaning, he named Jesus' love and compassion and mercy as the source of his identity as a follower of Jesus. And that was something Peter and the others held onto until the end of their lives.

It guided them through the rest of Jesus' ministry on earth. It carried them through what we call Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, through that long weekend to the Day of Resurrection, to Jesus commissioning them to go and make disciples.

That confession prepared them for that commissioning, and it shaped their own ministry and witness.

We know that the disciples didn't always get it right. They made mistakes. But they never stopped confessing Jesus as the Messiah, even when they messed up. And they didn't only confess it where it was safe. Some of them even confessed it in places and at times when it cost them their lives.

But their faith and witness strengthened the faith and witness of others in ways they couldn't have imagined. Placing their trust in Jesus as the source of their identity freed them from worrying about what could or could not happen, either in the world or to them. Because Jesus never changes.

When we think about what it means to confess Jesus as the Messiah today, I think a lot of times we think about the Creed that we say every Sunday. But to confess Jesus as the Messiah is more than just saying some words on a page, or saying them from memory.

And if we aren't careful, our confession can become a symbolic action instead of something that shapes who we are and how we live our lives. And we can forget that our confession goes beyond us as individuals and is really about who we are as a church – as a congregation and as an institution.

We know that one of the loudest Christian voices in the news today is that of the far right. We know what it's saying, I don't need to repeat it here.

But we have a voice, too. We have a message that matters – a message that changes lives. And it's on us to make sure people hear it.

¹In his letter to the ELCA last week, Presiding Bishop Curry shared a reflection on his experience as a mission developer, saying, "It is not what you think you're bringing into the community. It's who you are in the community...People don't care about what you know 'til they know that you care."

He uses the words "faithful," "informed," and "engaged" to describe a vision for Lutheran Christians living out their calling. And he frames this as a call to be trusted messengers in this election season. But he reminds us that living out our calling goes beyond any particular season.

He reminds us that faith grounds us in God's promises, and that Christ sends us out to love our neighbors and serve the world.

When we live into our calling to love our neighbors and serve the world, we are making a confession of faith in Jesus. And it's more than just saying words, we're embodying it. We're living the way Jesus calls us to live.

¹ <https://www.elca.org/news/a-call-to-be-trusted-messengers-in-this-election-season>

But if others don't know why we're doing it, then we're no different than any other organization that goes out and helps people.

It isn't about bringing people to church. It isn't about converting people or beating them over the head with the Bible. It's about truthfully, and sometimes courageously, telling people – like actually saying the words, “We do this because of Jesus. We do this because loving and serving others are core values of our faith. Because that's what Jesus calls us to do and who he calls us to be.”

It's that simple.

When we confess that Jesus is the Messiah, we name Jesus' love and compassion and mercy as the source of our identity as followers of Christ. Those three characteristics root our faith in God's promises. They keep us grounded. They are the lenses through which we are informed and engaged in our community.

They take us way beyond any words we might speak on a Sunday morning. They make our confession a statement of trust – specifically a statement that says we trust who Jesus is.

And that trust shapes the way we live our lives. It influences how we treat each other face-to-face, and what we say about each other when we're not in the same room. It guides our way of thinking, and transforms us, and encourages us to make the world the place it ought to be. The world Jesus showed us is possible and that God wants for us.

Confessing Jesus as the source of our identity is something we can hold onto no matter what happens in the world, no matter how much or how often things go sideways. Putting our trust in Jesus frees us from having to worry about any of that, because Jesus never changes.

There are still places in the world today where it's dangerous to name Jesus as the Messiah. But the US isn't one of them. But in our country, there are a lot of things and people competing to be the source of our identity. Fighting to be that thing or person in which we place our trust.

And if we aren't careful, Jesus gets bumped out and the source of our identity shifts to whatever takes his place. And then that is what shapes how we live and respond to what's happening around us.

This plays out in a variety of ways. Like when we become more concerned with having stuff than with caring for the wellbeing of others. Or when we don't pay attention to

how the social structure either favors or discriminates against people for arbitrary reasons.

But when we claim Jesus as the Messiah, when he is the source of our identity, his love and compassion and mercy free us from the fear and worry that lead to these other behaviors and ways of living. It gives us the courage to trust his love, and embody it as we work towards making the world equitable and safe for everyone.

Because when we confess Jesus as the Messiah, we do more than say he is the Son of God who came to redeem the world. We proclaim to ourselves and others that Jesus is God with us. That he loves us and is committed to us throughout our lives.

We, then, commit to living in such a way that we share that love and commitment with others to shape the world into the place that God wants for us.

When we confess Jesus as the Messiah, we claim him as the source of our identity. We declare our trust in him. And that frees us from worrying about what anyone might think, and whatever may or may not happen.

Because Jesus never changes. Thanks be to God! Amen.