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6/20/2010

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:24

We Confess Our Faith

Hebrews 2:14-3:4

- A. *Because it is the truth.*
- B. *Because it is about Jesus.*
- C. *Because it gives life everlasting.*

This Friday, June 25th we will be celebrating the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession with a joint worship service at Gethsemane Lutheran. Pastor Boehringer and I realize that this has not been a long standing tradition for either of our congregations. As a matter of fact we are the only two churches in our entire circuit who will be celebrating this day with a worship service. In many ways that is a shame, because this is no mere historic event from the past that we don't want to forget but rather it is a living clear presentation of the truth of Jesus that defines who we are today.

Four hundred eighty years ago on June 25th 1530 the Lutherans formally and officially presented their confession of faith to Emperor Charles V. This confession is known as the Augsburg Confession. We most often think of "confession" as something we do to tell God about our sins, but confession also means to speak the truth clearly and boldly. This latter meaning is what is meant by our Lutheran Confessions, including the Augsburg Confession.

In this confession of faith our Lutheran forefathers presented much in common with the one historic Christian church going all the way back to the apostles themselves. They confessed the truth of God as three persons, of Jesus as both true man and true God, of sin and its damnable effect, and of the fact that Jesus is the only way to heaven. As you know the largest difference between the Lutherans and others was on how one gets to heaven. We Lutherans believe teach and confess that we are saved by faith alone. Jesus Himself makes this so clear when He states that whoever believes in Him will have everlasting life. Jesus makes no demands of works or actions, rather He simply calls for an active living faith in Him. But most of you know this. What you may not think about however is how that one teaching, central as it is, colors and informs every other teaching of the Bible.

For example take baptism. In Luther's day most people believed that baptism was something that simply begun the process of being saved. Baptism for many was simply God "getting the ball rolling" in one's life. After this initial gift of grace a person had to work to finish the goal of salvation. The problem was that at any point in one's life there was no certainty of salvation. What happened was that people focused more on their "good works" than they did God's grace. In the end very little grace or hope. Why did they teach this? Because they rejected the idea that salvation could be as simple or complete as a free gift from God to people based on Jesus' death on the cross. What was at stake was one's entire life lived in Jesus.

A second illustration of the great impact of salvation by faith alone is the very concept and understanding of the church herself. In Luther's day the common unbiblical and mistaken belief was that God was quite far off and inaccessible to people. This was true for God's presence and His grace but sadly in a very real way it was true for God's Word as well. In Luther's day the misconception was that very few people had access to God--only priests, those specially ordained to serve in the public ministry or those who had withdrawn from society in the monasteries truly had access to God. But this false teaching was completely overturned by the truth of salvation by faith alone.

The Lutheran Fathers understood that faith alone saves and faith alone makes one a Christian with immediate and full access to God. This was nothing new that they had dreamt up but rather was a very basic teaching of Scripture. Indeed St. Peter says as much when he writes: **"As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."** (1 Peter 2:4-5).

The simple fact of the matter is that these Lutheran confessors knew God's Word and were able and willing to make a clear statement of belief and condemnation of error because they recognized God's Word as truth. This shouldn't surprise us because this is what Jesus made so very clear by His own Words. Jesus said, **"If you hold to my teaching, you really are my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** (John 8:32). Our Lutheran forefathers placed their trust in Christ, and did so by listening to and believing the simple teachings and promises of Jesus--when they did

this they knew the Spirit of God would reign free and bring life and vitality to the church and error (though it would always persist and need to be fought) would be guarded against. In short the Lutheran confessors knew that the teachings/doctrines of the Bible meant life itself.

This is something that is often misunderstood today. Truth is not something that is a rather boring 'something' that we can hold onto or even have an obligation to protect from the changing world; rather Jesus would have all of His followers rightly believe that His teachings, all of the teachings of the Bible are that which gives life now and into eternity. Jesus is after all the living 'word' of God.

When Jesus said that the truth would set you free He was talking about the freedom from the blindness and death of this world. That is why the Augsburg Confession professes truths that are not just something to be thought of or intellectually acknowledged but they are truths that are lived out. These are truths of knowing God as He presents Himself, of knowing and being certain of our salvation, and finally of living and working together as the body of Christ in the world. Each and every truth and point of confession is something not only to be believed but to be lived. For this reason these truths are not just for the seminary or our schools to teach pastors and school teachers, but these are truths for each and every family--they are truths for the home.

C.F.W. Walther who helped establish the Missouri Synod but also was in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod and trained a generation or so of WELS pastors was a great proponent of every Christian knowing and having access to both Scripture and a clear proclamation of Scriptural truths as found in the Book of Concord. Walther said:

"The Book of Concord should be in every Lutheran home. If a person isn't familiar with this book, he'll think, "That old book is just for pastors, I don't have to preach. After working all day, I can't sit down and study in the evening. If I read my morning and evening devotions, that's enough.". No that is not enough! The Lord doesn't want us to remain children, who are blown to and fro by every wind of doctrine; instead of that, He wants us to grow in knowledge so that we can teach others." (Walther Essays)

Why was Walther so bold as to make this statement? Walther knew that every article of teaching, every doctrine found in our

Lutheran Confessions first of all was clearly taught in the Bible and was something God wanted us and the world to know. Second of all Walther knew that the one common element in every article of faith was Jesus--He is the core of any and all our knowledge about who God is and what God's disposition towards us is. As a matter of fact you can take any single doctrine in our confessions and ask the question, how does this relate to Jesus Christ. This is why I chose our text for this morning from the book of Hebrews.

What does Hebrews tell us this morning? We are told that Jesus is God and that He came to this fallen, broken world to be like us but without sin so that He could rescue us from our sins. The good news that we so often take for granted is that God is no longer our enemy, He is no longer a 'something' but a 'Someone.' God is Someone who loves us and who is there to help us in every aspect of our lives. When you study the Bible and when you know the truths God has revealed to us you know Jesus for He is the center of it all. Remember what Jesus said to those false teachers of the Law who studied the Bible but who were rejecting Jesus to His face? **"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me."** (John 5:39). And it is why Hebrews tells us: **"Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess."** (Hebrews 3:1).

Is there any greater act we can do today than to confess boldly and clearly to the world around us who Jesus is? Is there any gift given to us that we now possess as great as the gift of eternal life which we have by faith in the knowledge and trust of who Jesus is? Today we can know who God is and who we are in God. Today we can confess this message to the world and change everything. This IS something not just to remember but to live, Friday on the anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, today as we worship God and every day. Amen.