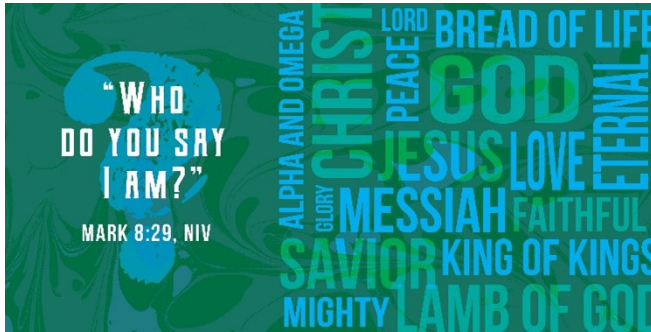


WHAT DO YOU SAY ABOUT JESUS?



The end of the Gospel text for this Sunday concludes with these words, *“For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My Words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels”* (Mark 8:37-38). If those words of Jesus don’t make you sit up straight in your pew, nothing

will. Actually, this Sunday’s Gospel is full of critical revelations: Peter confesses the truth upon which the Church is built: Christ. But Peter also puts his foot in his mouth when he rebukes Jesus concerning His impending works of salvation involving the cross. Jesus tells him to *“Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man”* (Mark 8:33). Jesus also exhorts the disciples and us to *“deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me”* (Mark 8:34). Certainly lofty words to live by spoken by our Lord.

I don’t know about you but whenever I hear those words of Jesus, “Who do YOU say that I am?” I am driven to my knees in repentance for all the times and opportunities, all the gatherings I have attended and even the times I have had the microphone in my hand – and I’ve said nothing about Jesus. **But this article is not to condemn each and every one of us for our failures - but to encourage us that we DO have something life-changing to say – even just saying His name: JESUS THE CHRIST!**

The pastor’s children’s message included this riddle: “What has a bushy tail, eats nuts and climbs trees?” The children all reflected for quite some time and then finally one of them shouted out with an answer: “Pastor, pastor. It sure sounds like a squirrel to me, but it still must be Jesus. The answer in your children’s messages is always Jesus.”

If only we could **remember and confess** what the children seem to know with great certainty in their heart - **Jesus is God’s answer** - His revelation for our sinful condition and messy situations. When the questions are raised - Where is forgiveness? Where is there eternal hope? Where is there a presence and power for each and every situation I face? - the only answer is JESUS! He is the answer for our children just as He is the answer for every adult struggling with fears, doubts, anxieties, hurts, disappointments and sadness. We are blessed with the privilege of sharing the answer, the confession of Jesus the Christ.

The very same Peter who confessed Jesus as the Christ but also had his mind set on the things of this world later wrote, *“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you; yet do this with gentleness and respect...”* (1 Peter 3:15). This is our encouragement as fragile, failing, sinful human beings: God doesn’t kick us off the team because we’ve missed opportunities to speak His name, or even gave a negative witness with our thoughts, words and deeds. Peter had to be told to “get behind Me, Satan”; he denied his Savior three times

even when he was confronted by just a little servant girl; he hid behind locked doors when Jesus was crucified. But it was the angel that spoke of the Risen Lord on Easter, *“He has risen; He is not here....But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee” (Mark 16:6-7)*. God wanted Peter - who messed up so many times - to know of the salvation that was his because of the salvation found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ - your Christ, your Messiah - from sin, death, the grave and the devil. Jesus frees you to be His witnesses - to speak about Jesus.

Every Sunday in your church you boldly answer the question put forth by Jesus as you confess one of the Creeds. And with the advantage of living after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, you know how it turns out and you boldly confess that too: He was crucified, suffered, buried, and on the third day rose again. That's the truth, the foundation upon which you stand for eternity. God has blessed you with that confession.

But just like Peter - we mess up. So we rend our hearts in confession saying that we have sinned in thought, word and deed and with what we have done and not done. We examine our lives in comparison to the Ten Commandments (as Luther suggested) and find that we have fallen short of God's perfect will. Do we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength? Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? Far from it, right? In fact, if you're like me, my first impulse is to love me, serve me, and desire others to do the same. Each and every one of us is a poor, miserable sinner - especially when it comes to sharing the Christ in our adulterous and sinful world. God shows His love for us and the world around us in that while we were still sinners - Christ died for us and for our salvation. Thanks be to God!

I said earlier that you are equipped, willing and ready to SAY what you know and believe about Jesus, your HOPE. Where there is revelation, there is confession. Where there is confession, there is revelation. The two always go together. They go hand in hand. We listen to Jesus who reveals the Father through the work of the Spirit - one God, three Persons, the Trinity.

And so confessing (SAYING!) the truth does not mean speaking our own thoughts or opinions or wisdom, what we think is true or would like to be true - it is to speak the truth revealed to us by God in His Word. But we are tempted to do otherwise, aren't we? Tempted not to say what we have heard from God's Word. Or maybe more commonly, tempted **not to speak at all and to remain silent**. Tempted to doubt and mistrust what God has told us in His Word; that what He has told us is not so sure and true; that perhaps there are other ways, different ways, better ways. And those are great temptations because our confession is being attacked from many directions these days, and quite frankly, it is easier not to confess, isn't it? To just keep our mouths shut and not cause trouble, or just to go along with what others are doing and saying because it's their business, right? SAYING - SPEAKING JESUS INTO OUR WORLD can be dangerous - to friendships, to popularity, to your job, and in some places, even to your life.

But as our Lord speaks in this week's Gospel, it is far more dangerous for you and the world to be without the saving Gospel. *“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:37)*. WE ARE BLESSED to have in the quiver of our hearts and minds the revelation of God's promises like these: *“Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28)*. *“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I*

have overcome the world" (John 16: 33). "Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b). "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD" (Psalm 118:17).

In order to make all of these words and all His promises certain for you and the world where you live and breathe and have your very being (Acts 17:28), Jesus uttered three final words on the Friday that we call "Good." He uttered three words as He commended His spirit into His Father's hands and gave up His life for the world. He said, "*It is finished*" for you, for me, for the world. With those words, everything necessary for our salvation is fulfilled. It is complete. Sin forgiven. Debt paid. Life made new. We are compelled to SAY something, right?!!!

And with the revelation of such great and precious promises, given to us by the Christ our Savior, *we speak - we say with boldness - Jesus is the Christ*. We acknowledge Him and His grace and goodness toward us. Grace and goodness that we in no way deserve. And we rejoice to do so, knowing that while what we boldly say may not be welcomed by many in this world, it is needed by every single person. So many – like us – who need to hear that there is a God and Savior who loves them, who died for them, and who does not want to throw them away or get rid of them but wants to adopt them into His family through Baptism, forgive them, and feed them here with His very own Body and Blood.

And with the revelation of such great and precious promises, given to us by the Christ our Savior, we speak also - again as St. Paul said - not just by our words, but by offering ourselves as living sacrifices. Laying down our lives for others, not in death, but by living in love, in service, in forgiveness, in care, in mercy, in being the voice of those who cannot speak for themselves, giving of our time, our energy, our material blessings, our abilities, to serve those in need.

Not because we have to, but because we can; because Christ has so loved us; because Christ has set us free from having to serve ourselves with His service to us; because the Word and Spirit of Christ transforms you, your way of thinking, and your way of life. That you no longer are conformed to this world, but are conformed to the image of Christ, whom you confess. For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. Your speech and your life.

As I said, that's never going to be easy, and if you're like most Christians, you'll even think you're getting worse and worse at it, not better! The culture of hate and toleration of sin just makes it tougher than ever before. God is preparing you every day to SAY who He is for you. We can rely on the words and promises of Jesus. His word of forgiveness, His word of blessing, His Word that whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it. **Of that you can be sure and therefore speak boldly**. For that's what Jesus did for you and is giving to you. And He who gave Himself for you is hanging on to you.

With MLB spring training underway, here is a thought from the late Yogi Berra: According to that great fount of wisdom, Yogi Berra once said, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." Mark 8 is a kind of theological fork in the road. This chapter is the hinge of Mark's Gospel. For the disciples, Mark 8 presents a kind of fork in the road. And like Yogi Berra, as they look at the fork in the road, they want to take it. But they want it both ways. They want to stick with Jesus and be His followers while at the same time insisting that Jesus follow them down the path they want to take with minds on the things of this world.

According to research conducted by George Gallup, 12% of Americans are "highly spiritually committed." They are those who truly understand what Jesus meant when He said, "deny yourself, take up a cross and follow Me." Gallup says the members of this group are "a breed apart from the rest of the populace." This gives us the impetus to SAY what we know and believe about Jesus. With the Holy Spirit accompanying our words, life-changing transformation takes place - one soul at a time.

A little boy who was just learning about addition and subtraction in school looked up during worship one Sunday morning, saw the cross hanging from above on the altar and hollered, "Look, Daddy! There's a plus sign in our Church."

The cross really is a *plus sign* in our Church. It's a plus sign in our lives daily. It tells us of the advantages of being a disciple, a follower of Jesus and accepting the forgiveness God offers through the Cross of Christ Crucified for each and every one of us. Through the cross God did what only God does. God transformed a horrible instrument of torture and death into a symbol of life and hope. God transformed tragedy into triumph; humiliation into glory; despair into hope. God took what was ugly and cruel and violent and transformed it into a thing of beauty and a symbol of peace. And with each new day we celebrate that our eternal lives are marked with this same cross - it defines who we are 24/7 and it fills our mouths with thanksgiving, praise and witness.

The Evangelization Team is looking for your story to share with our District to encourage such witness in our daily lives. When did you say something about Jesus? What was that experience like? Did you wear a Christian T-shirt or cross and it sparked a conversation? What did you say? Please share a witness that has filled your life with joy because you were led by the Spirit to speak the saving truth. You can send your story to the District office or email it to me at gracelc.pjd@gmail.com.

Your District Evangelization Team meets each month asking the Holy Spirit to work mightily in our Bishop, district staff, pastors and teachers - and people like you in bearing witness for Christ and His saving grace.

What do you say about Jesus? He is your Christ and that has changed your life for eternity. May God bless your witness where God has placed you this week.