

Sermon: The Anniversary of the Augsburg Confession 2023

Matthew 10:26-33

Our churches also teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favour and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God regards as righteousness in his sight (Rom 3:4).



That is article 4 of the Augsburg Confession, dealing with the gospel of Justification by grace through faith. It is the key article of the whole confession, and of the whole Christian Faith which we, as Lutherans, say we believe. In the Lutheran Reformation, God brought this pure gospel to light. Luther didn't come up with it. It is the biblical teaching that had been obscured, denied, and ignored. It is the core of Christian belief. As one of my students put it, rather earthily, in an essay, 'it is the guts of everything'.

On June 25 (this day), 1530 the Augsburg Confession was presented to the Roman Catholic Emperor, Charles V in Augsburg, Germany at the imperial Diet or Parliament (In 2019 I stood on the very spot where it happened, although the building where it happened is long gone).

On that day the reformers did exactly what Jesus teaches and commands here in today's Gospel reading. They confessed Jesus Christ before the world. They did not act out of fear, but in faith. They did not know what was going to happen. They had some hope that this confession might be accepted by the Emperor, but they knew very well that it was risky, and that they could be in danger from those who wanted them and their confession of faith to disappear. Luther himself was not present in Augsburg because it was too dangerous; it represented too good an opportunity for the Emperor to arrest him as a heretic and get rid of him. He was in hiding about 300kms away.

So why, if it was so risky to make their confession of faith, did they do it? Couldn't they have just flown under the radar? Could they not just have quietly done their own thing and kept a little quieter about it all, and not put themselves in danger by stirring things up?

Well the answer to that question is in today's Gospel reading, where Jesus says to his disciples as he sends them out:

- *Do not be afraid of those who oppose the Gospel.*
- *Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered. Nothing is secret that will not be known.*
- *Do not fear those who kill the body, but rather one who can take away both body and soul.*
- *Everyone who confesses me before others I will confess before my Father in heaven.*

That is why. Jesus is talking here about *confessing our faith*, that is, saying together the same thing that God himself says in his Word, and to doing that publicly.

Faith in Christ alone makes us Christians. Confession alone *marks us* as Christians. It is who we are; it is what we do. Only God can judge the heart. Only God can see what we really and truly believe. Nobody but God can see our faith, so the world needs to *hear us confess that faith*. And other Christians need to hear us confess that faith, as we do each Sunday together in creed.

On this day, as we celebrate the faith of the confessors at Augsburg, Jesus our Lord speaks to *us*, who have received that legacy; he calls us to make that living legacy of confessing the Faith our own.

That can be difficult. It can be costly. But it is also the way of joy, peace and eternal life in the presence of God the Father.

He gives us two things here, a *call* and a *promise*.

Christ's Call

Some Christians today say 'my faith is personal'. And so it is. I cannot believe for you and you cannot believe for me. But the fact that faith is personal *does not mean that it is private*. It is not. Jesus says so right here. Faith is a public matter. The Christian faith has always been confessed publicly, by the church together and by individual Christians. It is more than the personal conviction or feeling or experience of an individual Christian, though it certainly is that. Christian confession is confessing the Gospel that belongs to the whole church of Christ. The church is not a secret society, where you join and pledge loyalty and then you are initiated into its sacred mysteries. The Christian faith, our public teaching, is an open book. Our personal faith is an open book for all to read. Jesus calls us all to be ready to speak his name, to own him as our saviour and Lord, to clearly speak his word when and where we are able to do so. It may take different forms.

This may mean, for example, answering a question somebody asks you:

Do you really believe all that sin and forgiveness stuff? Yes, I do, and it is what gives me hope.

Why do you wear that cross around your neck? Do you think it makes you holy? No, but it shows the one whose death on the cross forgave me and gave me eternal life.

Confessing our faith might call us to make a stand at some point, and confess the truth of Jesus in the face of falsehood and evil in our society. That does not mean we do so harshly or aggressively, but in love and with humility – in the spirit of the Confessors at Augsburg, who offered their statement of faith with great grace and courtesy.

Saving faith in Jesus calls and motivates us to confess this faith. Paul describes the relationship between believing and confessing in Romans 10:8-10:

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes for righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made for salvation.

Faith and confessing the faith go together. They are two sides of the same coin. They are like breathing in and breathing out.

Do you find this challenging? Me too. I feel afraid sometimes that confessing the faith will get me into trouble, and cause me pain. If you feel that too, then let's turn for courage and strength to the wonderful promise Jesus makes to us in this text.

Christ's Promise

Jesus tells us in this text that our confession of the Gospel is powerful and effective. He says that what is hidden will be uncovered; what is secret will be revealed. The truth of our testimony, and our faithful witness to it will be revealed, in due course. Even if our faith and our witness to Christ are maligned and rejected, and even painted as evil or oppressive – as today they *are*, the truth *will* be revealed. This may happen sometime in the future, or it may happen only in the last judgement.

It is quite incredible to study the history of what happened after the confessors presented to Augsburg Confession at Augsburg in 1530. The Roman Catholic emperor and the Pope's theologians rejected it utterly as false. It looked like it was a total flop, and that the Gospel that has come to light would be silenced once again. And yet over the next 60 years it emerged as possibly the most important and influential statement of Christian Faith in Europe, and has been confessed by now over five centuries, and is today, incidentally, even being studied by Lutherans and Catholics in ecumenical dialogue. What is hidden will be uncovered.

When we confess the truth the Holy Spirit works through it and reveals that truth, and rewards and blesses our faithful confession.

Jesus says in verse 32 "Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven." Jesus will speak our names before the Father, he will intercede for us. He will claim us as his disciples and friends. He will bring us his Father as his beloved brothers and sisters who confessed his name. Our faith in Christ alone is the way to salvation, and our confession of that saving faith brings glory to God the Father, and shows who we are – his own children.

Precious children. He knows and loves each one of us intimately. Not even a sparrow dies and he does not know about it – how much more precious are we? Everything about you is treasured by him- even the hairs of your head are counted, says Jesus. God will take care of us, no matter what. Even if we suffer, and yes – hard to imagine though it may be - even if we die because we confess the Gospel, no human being can take from you the eternal life God the Father has already given us through Jesus Christ.

In this reading in which Jesus calls us to confess his name and his Gospel before the world, a sometimes hostile world, in which people oppose the Church. But he does not leave us to do this alone or in our own power.

Three times in this reading (in verse 26, then in verse 28, then in verse 31) he says: Do not be afraid, this is my Gospel, you are my people, and I hold you precious forever. Amen.

Amen