

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 2-3, 2017
Matthew 16:21-28

The Augsburg Confession – The Return of Christ

Here we are at the Labor Day weekend and the unofficial close of summer. For a very long time, here in Fairfax County the day after Labor Day signaled the return to school. Not so this year. That happened this past week on Monday, August 28. So, what's the verdict: good, bad, indifferent? That depends on who you talk to. All of this is ironic because school in Fairfax County always started on the day after Labor Day. Meanwhile, across the Potomac River in Maryland, schools there always started the third or fourth week in August, but now with this school year all public schools in Maryland have been mandated to start the day after Labor Day. So there has been this complete flip flop from one side of the Potomac to the other over when school starts. It is that time of year. This Labor Day weekend, we are experiencing some very minor effects of Tropical Storm Harvey. These are indeed very minor in comparison with the overwhelming rainfall amounts and massive flooding that the Gulf Coast has experienced, the Houston area in particular. Many of us have family or friends there, or lived there ourselves at one time. Pastor Greg Finke, our *Joining Jesus on His Mission* friend, makes his home there as well. We continue to pray for God's mercy upon all the people who have been displaced, who have lost homes and businesses and even loved ones. To that end, we want to provide opportunity for members and friends of St. John's to contribute to relief efforts. Please see the color insert in the *Weekly Word* that outlines avenues for giving. As we consider what we can do to help, we think of and pray for those people who desperately want to return home, but may not have homes left that they can return to. All of this points us to that final homecoming when Christ shall come again to judge the world in righteousness and take us to be with him forever. Our summer preaching series on the Augsburg Confession concludes this weekend as we focus on the Return of Christ. May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Once again today, we encounter our friend, Peter, in the appointed Gospel lesson. In the Gospels, Peter is sometimes very much on target and at other times he's way out in left field. Last week we heard about his confession of who Jesus is when Jesus asked the disciples: **"But who do you say that I am?"** (Matthew 16:15), and Peter boldly replied: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"** (Matthew 16:16). Yes! Peter was spot-on! But almost immediately after this, Jesus began to teach his disciples what the purpose of his being the Christ, the Son of the living God, was all about: **"From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised"** (Matthew 16:21). This was absolutely unthinkable for Peter. Jesus had demonstrated clearly who He was by healing the sick, casting out demons, commanding the forces of nature, multiplying food to feed huge crowds, preaching and teaching as no one ever did. Being subjected to this kind of gross indignity and injustice was so far below what should happen to the promised Messiah, the Christ, according to Peter at least, and he would have none of it. So he pulls Jesus aside and reprimands him: **"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you"** (Matthew 16:22). Peter is an everyman for every man, woman, and child – for all of us – who have ever wanted to set the agenda for Jesus. Haven't we all at some point told Jesus how He should be doing his job and running the kingdom of God? We get kind of full of ourselves and have to be brought back down to reality. This is what Scripture calls repentance. It becomes one of those teachable moments for Peter, the rest of the disciples, and us as well. Jesus sharply rebukes Peter: **"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance [stumbling block] to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"** (Matthew 16:23). Ouch! That had to have hurt. Jesus had just said that He would build his Church on the rock of Peter's confession of faith (Matthew 16:18), and now Jesus calls Peter "Satan." Yikes! Jesus also says that Peter is the kind of rock that's really a stumbling block – something that trips people up and causes them to fall. Pretty bad. Here's the thing: if one of

Jesus' closest disciples can mess up like this, then there is hope for you and me who also are prone to messing up in big ways and small ways. This is exactly why Jesus came into the world as the Christ, the Son of the living God: to pay the price of our messing up, what Scripture calls sin, and restore us to right relationship with our heavenly Father. All this Jesus has done for you.

Jesus' first coming was to set things straight and pay our debt of sin, not with gold or silver, but with his holy and precious blood, with his innocent suffering and death upon the cross. When this gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus is ours through faith, we hear Jesus' words in a new and different way: **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"** (Matthew 16:24-25). When we hear these challenging words of Jesus with ears of faith, we are moved to say in faith: "Jesus has given everything for me, including his very life. Whatever I may be called upon to sacrifice in following him will be a small price to pay." This is why we come together week by week, gathering around the Lord's gift of his Word and Sacraments. There is strength and blessing in these gifts for our journey of faith! And when we become weak and discouraged in following Jesus, when we feel like it's all in vain, it is then that we bear one another up in faith, reminding each other that the Lord is at our side and that nothing in all of creation can separate us from his love (Romans 8:39). The path of discipleship may well take us through some tough times when our faith is tested. Taking up our cross and following Jesus is the path of discipleship to which He calls us until He comes again. That will be Jesus second coming, as He tells us: **"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom"** (Matthew 16:27-28).

These words of Jesus are serious and sobering. We ought not to disregard or forget about them in the busyness of life. At the end of the day, at the end of our life, at the end of the world, the one thing that matters is this: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, they are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me – the Bible tells me so." If you don't take anything else away from this sermon, please take that. It's the truth that makes an eternal difference. It's the truth that gives us confidence and boldness of faith to stand on that great and final day, trusting that we are clothed in the blood-bought robe of Christ's own righteousness. When Christ shall come again to judge the world in righteousness, we may lift up our heads knowing that He is coming to take us home to be with him forever. Amen. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.