

Confession of St. Peter
Sermon Text: Matthew 16:13-19
Date Preached: January 18, 2009

Grace to you and peace from God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Last September and October, Christians Uniting sponsored a five week Tradition study. Over the course of those weeks, those who participated met at St. Florian, St. Mary's Byzantine, Norvelt Union Church, St. Paul U.C.C. across the street and here learned from each other.

As we met in each of our respective congregations we focused on our core understandings of the Christian faith. We heard the call stories of each of the Pastors who led these studies. Each of those call stories had a common thread. It was not our own choosing that led us into ordained ministry it was a calling of God upon us.

As we met we discovered with heartache that there are significant differences that remain between our various traditions. Most poignantly were the differences we have relating to Holy Communion.

Some of our denominations are more open when it comes to who may receive the Sacrament of Communion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America teaches that those who are baptized are welcome at the table. We teach that Christ is truly present, in with and under the earthly elements of bread and wine.

We teach that this is a sacrament of God's grace and that the one who invites us to the table is not the pastor, but our Lord Jesus Christ. We accept that one does not need to be Lutheran to come forward and receive.

While we don't agree, we do respect the teachings of other Christian churches that differ from our understanding. Those differences are hard to accept, especially when families do not practice Christianity in the same denomination.

We all heard the heartache that exists in some families. I've heard the questions and seen the looks of disagreements on people faces as these issues surface.

Overall, we came to a better understanding about how our various traditions view the teachings of Christ. We don't agree on every point of interpretation. We don't agree with how every element of the faith is practiced in each of our congregations.

What we discovered in these studies is that there is much where we do agree with one another. The first and most significant of our agreements comes in the words of St. Peter. In answering Jesus question, “who do you say that I am?” Peter responds with boldness and enthusiasm, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus is the Messiah is the common confession that unites a very diverse family of God. For all our denominational distinctiveness we share this common confession of faith.

To say that Jesus is the Messiah is not simply fluff to hide our differences. Rather, the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah lies at the core of our faith.

It is Christ who taught Peter and the others that being the Messiah is a call to suffer, be crucified, dead and on the third day rise again. It is not an easy path that Jesus walks. It is not a path that we as disciples want Jesus to walk.

For as bold as Peter is, he is also just as weak when he tells Jesus that this must not happen to him. Yet, for us and for our salvation, Jesus suffers and dies. For us and for our salvation, Jesus was raised from death.

This work is not our own, but Jesus. By the grace of God we are declared just and our relationship with God that was broken by our sin is restored. This is at the heart of our faith. It is a core that transcends denominational barriers.

Such teaching was echoed in each of our tradition studies. It is also this teaching that has opened the door for us to do more collaborative work together.

Over the past two generations the Christian church has made great strides in working more closely together, through such means as feeding the poor, advocating justice, striving for gender and racial equality, to name but a few. We still have more work to do in all these areas.

We respond and work together when disasters strike here at home and abroad. Congregations in our synod are working together ecumenically in St. Afterschool, providing a learning, social and faith interaction for school. Christians Uniting is exploring that idea here. It is another example of how we are seeking ways to do ministry together.

It is frequently in the doing of ministry that we engage in conversation about how we can come to a better understanding of who we are as Christians that

practice our faith from a particular denominational perspective. It is through such conversations that greater unity in the gospel can be achieved.

Yes, we have differences that still keep us apart in important aspects of our faith. Such differences can be discouraging. Such differences are challenging families that worship in different denominations of Christianity.

As hard and as challenging as those differences are to overcome, the hope we have in overcoming them is not in ourselves, but in the work of the Holy Spirit that is present in us. The Holy Spirit empowered Peter. Likewise, the Spirit empowers us to confess Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God. It is this confession that unites us together and encourages us in the living out of our faith. AMEN.