

John Tietjen's Sermon on Confessing Christ

Colleagues,

ThTh 294 is a sequel to ThTh 293's reflections on Seminex's 30th birthday. On Sunday of that January week in 1974 John Tietjen was suspended from his office as President of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and the labor contractions began that birthed Seminex. This year on that same Sunday John preached in the congregation where he once was pastor in Ft. Worth, Texas. It was the Sunday on which church commemorates "The Confession of St. Peter." Confessing the faith—better said: confessing Christ at the center of the faith—was the issue 30 yrs ago. Confessing Christ is ALWAYS the issue, even if there never had been a Seminex. Last week's posting told of John's long-running encounter with cancer. In my e-mail exchange with John to get this text for you, one bon mot (of many) is too good to keep for myself. He told me: "I have learned the difference between being healed and being cured. I thank God for healing." John's sermon abounds in more bons mots. And no wonder, it's all about THE Good Word.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

*A Sermon by John H. Tietjen
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January 18, 2004

PETER'S CONFESSION – AND OURS
MATTHEW 16:13-16

When pastor Ron drew up the preaching schedule at the beginning of this year, I was scheduled to preach today. But that was canceled when I developed my serious health problems. Yet here I am ready to preach the sermon. Last Sunday I asked Pastor Ron if I might carry out the previously assigned responsibility. My reason is simple. My health problems are still there, though there is good news since my trip to Houston. But I know I am not going to have too many more opportunities like this. I have things I want, in fact, I need, to say. They are a burden on my heart, especially the message in today's Gospel. As we say in the language we have developed recently, I have a legacy to leave behind.

I very much welcome the opportunity to speak to you about the message in today's Gospel. The event is called Peter's Confession. It is balanced next Sunday by an event called the Conversion of St. Paul. The two leaders of the New Testament church together make up the Week of Prayer for Christian unity. I am not going to deal with that theme today, but rather with the event described in the Gospel. The event is the turning point in all the Synoptic Gospels, those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Up until this event Jesus has been traveling around, mostly in Galilee, gathering disciples and telling people the Gospel, the good news of the coming of the rule of God. From this point on Jesus is going to head toward Jerusalem and to the crucifixion waiting for him there. The crowds who came out to him were getting thin, and Jesus was experiencing opposition. He decided to get out of the limelight, to take the Twelve to Gentile territory, north to Caesarea Philippi, a town named after the emperor and one of King Herod's offspring.

Jesus wanted to take a sounding, to find out if he had been getting through to his followers, especially to the Twelve. So when they arrived at their destination, he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" The answers varied: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "Okay," Jesus said, "And who do you say that I am?" I can see them all looking at Simon, with whom they had already discussed the matter, expecting him to be their spokesman. He did just that. He said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

That is Peter's confession. It is also mine. Is it yours? Not everyone says that about who Jesus is. For some people Jesus is a teacher, a prophet perhaps, whose moral teachings are the foundation of the good life. A variety of answers people give about who Jesus is can be seen in the answers given by the people of the Jesus-seminar and its quest for the historical Jesus in the last decades of the 20th century. Who was he? A charismatic healer, a teacher of Wisdom like Solomon, a revolutionary for the poor and the oppressed, an itinerant cynic like those in the Greek world. When you read what these people have to say, you want to cry out, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?"

Another way people say who Jesus is is by substituting for Jesus key values from their own life. In other words Jesus is not the Messiah; something else is. And they give to that something else the loyalty and devotion that belong to the Messiah. Money is one of those values; so is success, popularity, power. Education is valued as a good above others; so is family. As people seek these goods and values to shape their lives, they put Jesus as Messiah in the back seat.

Peter's confession makes it clear who Jesus is. He is everything I have said this morning, everything others have

said about him, but he is more. He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Son of God tells us who he is; Messiah tells us what he does. As Son of God he did the Messiah's work of bringing God's gracious rule into people's lives. Peter made his confession out of the living faith of the people of Israel. They were waiting and longing for the Messiah to come, as many Jews do to this day. Peter was convinced he had found him.

We could use other language to confess the substance of Peter's confession. With the apostle John we could say Jesus is the eternal Word of God, who creates new life in us. With the apostle Paul we could say Jesus is the embodiment of God through whom we become a new creation. The point is the same. Jesus makes all the difference in how we see God and God's relation to us, what we do with our lives, and what we can expect God to do for us.

In Houston [sc. at the cancer clinic] this past week I have been reading *The Murder Room*, a novel by P.D. James. I have learned from reading other works by James that she is not only a great teller of detective stories but that she writes serious literature. I always expect to be rewarded by insights for me personally and that can actually serve as sermon material. I have two quotations from the present volume.

James Calder-Hale, a museum curator, learns in his mid-fifties that his cancer is back.

"He found himself unable to believe that anything he did, anything done to him, his mental attitude, his courage or his faith in his doctors, could alter the [inevitable victory of death.] Others might prepare to live in hope, to earn that posthumous tribute, 'after a gallant fight.' He hadn't the stomach for a fight, not with an enemy already so entrenched."

(*)

The second quotation is from a conversation between Calder-Hale and a museum employee. They are talking about people featured in the museum's Murder Room. The employee, Tally Clutton says:

"I sometimes wonder where they've all gone – not just the murderers and their victims, but all the people photographed in the museum. Do you wonder about that?"

"No, I don't wonder. That's because I know. We die like animals and from much the same cause and, except for the lucky few, in much the same pain."

"And that's the end?"

"Yes. It's a relief, isn't it?"

She said, "So what we do, how we act, doesn't matter except in this life?" (#)

That's where you wind up if you don't make Peter's confession, or something like it, your own. Commitment to Jesus as Messiah gives us a foundation for living that enables us to be blessed, as Jesus tells us in his Sermon on the Mount. More, it gives the Calder-Hales of this world a resource for dealing with the death sentence you hear when you receive the pronouncement of a terminal illness.

God is a very present help in trouble, as I am ready to witness. God gives the strength needed for the problems each new day brings. I have placed my life in God's hands. Therefore I know all will be well, including what happens at death. No, death is not the end of it all. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. God raised Jesus from the dead. Because He lives, I too will live. The Messiah said so.

I hope my point this morning is clear. We have to make Peter's confession our own. We can do it here in worship. As you meet

Jesus in the Holy Communion, say it to him: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And then live that way.

We have to make Peter's confession for the sake of others. Today at the later service my two grandchildren from Abilene will be here, Elizabeth and Chase. We are celebrating Elizabeth's eleventh birthday. I want Elizabeth and members of her family to realize what is of first and ultimate importance. I want her to be able to say, "You are Messiah, the Son of the living God." Oh, how I want that to happen for all the children of the congregation.

A recent report I read tells us that many congregations are investing in youth work in order to hold on to teenagers and their parents and as a result are neglecting children below the teen years. We ought to do the one and not neglect the other. "No child left behind" is a watchword not only for secular education but for education in the church. We have a responsibility, adult Christians, to share our legacy with those who come after us.

That's it. Like the farmer with only half his herd present, I've dumped the whole load. I hope to be back soon with another message of ultimate importance.

[Footnotes.

() P.D. James, The Murder Room, p.53*

(#) Ibid. pp. 59-60]

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