**Philippians 2:1-15**

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

14 Do all things without murmuring and arguing,

15 so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

**Matthew 16:13-19**

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

SERMON – AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

The affirmation of our faith is how this whole thing started; this whole series of “why we do what we do”. Why do we have it as part of the worship service; is it really necessary? This old language, creeds from almost millennia ago? I will confess, my response was visceral… emotional. It took me a while to figure out why; to really sit with my thoughts and emotions around it. I could agree with the fact that the Apostles’ Creed’s or the Nicene Creed’s words are strangely unfamiliar, even uncomfortable for us – outdated if you wish. And yes, maybe we want the church to be more contemporary or socially and culturally appropriate and timely; not stuck in the second or fourth century somewhere… So maybe, we use the newer statements of faith.

I figured if I had a hard time with why this was in the service, what compelled me to do so, then how can I expect all of you to just mindlessly follow. A lot of thought went into this series (which is almost at its end), really trying to make clear why we do things, and that it really isn’t mindless. And affirming our faith, I hope is not mindless either, or old-fashioned or incomprehensible.

See, I think we all need to know and be able to express what we believe. And I don’t mean just to say the words to repeat them as a memorized poem and childhood fable, but to have it sit in our hearts. So, maybe then you ask, why keep on reciting the same old thing? Maybe… but it is a good place to start, isn’t it?

Throughout my journey to become a pastor or minister, or whatever you want to call it, except for having to answer the question about your “call”; you have to write out your statement of faith, among other things. And this does not happen once, believe me; and you don’t write the same one twice – you have to show some growth… if nothing else, you become skillful at writing it down. But there is something else to it – it truly makes you examine what you really believe. It becomes personal, just like the confession of Paul to the Ephesians which we just read. It becomes something that lives in your heart, which influences the way you live. This eventually also becomes part of your personal information form that goes to the churches who are thinking about calling you. If you are interested, I have posted mine on the blog on the new website.

Maybe the disciples found themselves in the same position. At this point in time, they have been following Jesus for a while – they heard his sermons, saw his miracles and heard some parables about God’s new kingdom; but they still lacked faith, and Jesus at times calls them out for this. And then, out of the blue, he places the question right before them. And he really does not give them much time to think. First, he asks them in a sort of round-about why – “who do people say I am?”.

The disciples start rattling of a list of names – prophets and the like… people who had an impact on Israel’s history, whose names were well-known if you were a Hebrew or a Jew. Some still call Jesus anything but what he is…a good man, a man with integrity, a teacher, a prophet, an example for us to follow….

But then Jesus changes the question. “But you, who do YOU say I am?” Remember that feeling, sitting in class, knowing you didn’t do the assigned reading. The teacher is asking a question, and no one is answering. You are praying you aren’t called on because you have no idea what the answer is. Your stomach is churning and your palms sweating.… I can see the disciples sitting there, heads bowed, not wanting to look up into Jesus’ eyes, hoping that Jesus will not call on them.

You can almost hear the sigh of relief as Peter puts his hand up to answer. And what an answer it was. “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God”. And Jesus is impressed too, naming Peter as the rock on which his church will be build.

Do me a favor, and for a moment, insert your name in the place of that little word YOU--as in "Who do YOU say that I am?", -and think about what your answer will be. And although talking about Jesus as an idea is a far cry from trusting your life to Jesus and believing in the concept of God does not begin to compare with you actually knowing God; how do you live what you believe, if you don’t know what you believe?

It is a probing question. It forces us to ask where we stand with this Jesus and how far we are willing to travel with him. It is a question that gets to the heart of the matter and how we answer this question makes all the difference in the world. It shapes and defines who we will be; the way we live as church—as a community of disciples. It determines everything about us; it demands all our heart, mind, body, and soul. It leads to the cross and to giving ourselves sacrificially for God and for neighbor. But it is also the way that leads to life.

But if actions speak louder than words – and you and I both know they do – then I have to admit that most of my actions don’t confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Rather, they testify that he is a good man, a great man, even, an example to follow, someone to be inspired by, kind of like the prophets of old.

I suspect that I am not alone in sensing the disconnect between my public confession and my everyday actions. Not intentionally, and certainly with no malice thought. In fact, I suspect that most of us would like the words we say on Sunday not just to align with the rest of our lives but actually to matter day in and day out. To confess with our tongues and bended knee.

Who do you say he is? Not just say when repeating the Creed, but say with your lives; that is, with your relationships, your bank account, your time, your energy, and all the rest. Who do you really say Jesus is?

I want us to wonder together for a moment what we actually *mean* when we say, with Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the Living God. Or that Jesus is Lord. Or, for the theologically inclined, that Jesus is the second member of the Trinity. Or, in the words of the Creed, that Jesus is light from light, very God from very God, begotten but not made.

You see, I think it’s really hard to align our lives with our confession when we don’t really understand what that confession means…it’s really hard to put into words that we can understand. Words that describe Jesus, that is, to someone who never heard of him before. To a child…or adult…or friend…or stranger who happened to ask you about Jesus.

I know that can be a little scary, so I’ll go first. I think Jesus is God’s way of showing us how much God loves us and all people. God is so big that I think we have a hard time connecting with God, intimately. And so, God came to be like one of us, to live like one of us, to reveal just how God feels about us. In this way, Jesus revealed God’s heart, a heart that aches with all who suffer depression and think seriously about ending their lives; a heart that is upset and angry when a young people are shot in schools, at home and in the street; a heart that is torn up in grief at the desperate situation and violence that rips apart nations and families in the world; a heart that loves us like only an adoring parent can and so not only wants the best for us but is always eager to welcome us home in grace, forgiveness, and love.

But it’s more than that… I think Jesus also came to show us what’s possible. And so rather than give into the threat of disease, Jesus healed. Rather than surrender people to demons, Jesus showed compassion. Rather than let people starve because there’s not enough to go around, Jesus fed people who were hungry. Jesus refused to be satisfied or limited by the status quo and invites us to do the same, because if Jesus’ life and death show us how much God loves us, Jesus’ resurrection shows us that that love is more powerful than hate and fear and even death. Jesus shows us, in short, that God’s love wins.

Not perfect by a long shot – he died on a cross so that we can live. There should probably be more about forgiveness… and maybe a little wordy – typical of us preacher types. And as I grow, this may change. But maybe this at least describes what I believe… and knowing this, I know what way I will live my life. I think it means that I try to live filled with and sharing God’s love, aware of the brokenness of the world but even more aware of God’s grace and the power of the resurrection. It makes me look at all of my life – my time, my relationships, my hopes, dreams, finances, and all the rest – through the lens of both the power and possibilities created by seeing God’s heart laid bare in Jesus.

I realize how difficult it is to say in words what we believe; words that are adequate… But, I think it's worth asking ourselves this question, because Jesus would like to know from you exactly who you think he is with respect to the way you are living your life.

So why not ask yourself today: If Jesus should call on you when your hand is not raised, and ask you the question, "Who do **you** say that I am?" what is my response? Yes, in words, but how you follow that up with your life… your money, your decisions, your kindness, your humility? Whatever you say, and however you say it, you will not only be saying something powerful *about* Jesus, you will also be conveying to the world something that is deeply personal. You will be communicating why your relationship with the Lord is so dear to you.

Because the thing is, I don’t think Jesus asks us to confess who we believe he is for his sake, but rather for ours, that we might be caught up in the power of his love and life. That the confessions we offer about Jesus in church and in our daily lives aren’t finally words of praise to God but rather are words of power that help root us in the love and possibility that Jesus offers. So, I challenge you this week to truly think about this question – how do you answer? What do you say, and how then, do you live your life?