

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Service Theme: *The Presentation of the Augsburg Confession*

Sermon Theme: *The Confidence to Be Confessional*

June 25, 2023 Isaiah 55:1a, 6-11

During my Seminary training, one of my professors always told us, “If I call you in the middle of the night, you better be able to tell me what happened on June 25, 1530!” While you don’t have to worry about me calling you in the middle of the night—I don’t get up in the middle of the night for anything except an occasional crying child—I hope you’ll also remember what happened on June 25, 1530.

Exactly 493 years ago today, Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire convened a gathering in the German town of Augsburg. In attendance were German princes, nobles, and representatives of the Lutheran Reformers, as well as Charles’ imperial entourage, and representatives of the Catholic Church.

In that day, there was no separation of church and state, so political leaders expected their constituents to follow the same religion as them, ensuring the people’s loyalty and support in times of conflict or war. Charles V was loyal to the Catholic Church and the pope. But for the previous decade, an upstart German monk named Martin Luther and his followers had sought to reform abuses and false teachings within the Catholic Church, and to refocus the church on God’s Word. Many of the German nobility became followers of Luther and his reforms, which challenged the political and religious stability of the Holy Roman Empire.

So, in 1530, Charles gathered these political and religious leaders in Augsburg for two reasons—to give the followers of Luther a chance to confess their faith and address the religious differences that separated them, and to seek to regain the alliance and support of the German nobility and their military. The second reason was probably more important to Charles, because the previous Fall, the Ottoman Empire, under the leadership of Suleiman the Magnificent had laid siege to

Vienna, Austria and was threatening his whole empire. So on June 25, 1530, the document that came to be called the Augsburg Confession was first publicly read.

Maybe you’re thinking, “Ok, that’s a nice history lesson, Pastor. But why’s that “middle of the night knowledge” worthy? Why bother commemorating a small gathering nearly 500 years ago in a town few if any of us have ever been to? For starters, this day is basically the birthday of the confessional Lutheran Church, as the Augsburg Confession is still one of the primary confessions of faith the Lutheran Church subscribes to. Second, the example of the Lutheran Reformers at Augsburg, and more importantly the Word of God we’re studying today, give us **The Confidence to Be Confessional.**

Certainly, by confessing their faith at Augsburg, the Lutheran Reformers, and the German princes and nobles were putting themselves in danger. Martin Luther, declared a heretic, would have certainly been put to death if he’d showed his face in Augsburg. Making enemies with a powerful, ruthless ruler like Charles V wasn’t a great move for your life expectancy.

And for many people today, confessing our faith to others is very unappealing—largely because of what Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel: ***“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”*** Being “confessional”—holding to and publicly confessing a specific faith-- will divide people. To believe in something naturally means being divided from people who believe in something different. People who believe we’re saved through faith in Jesus as Savior, and those who insist we can only be saved by doing enough good works to earn Heaven are divided, even if they don’t desire to be.

So, because of the divisive nature of being confessional, some Christians, and even some Christian churches refuse to publicly confess their doctrines and teachings, out of fear of offending or upsetting people, or out of fear of being divided from, looked down on, or ostracized by others.

Subjective morality—the concept that everyone can determine right or wrong for themselves; and Universalism—the concept that all belief systems are valid and right—are at peak popularity, because they seemingly sidestep the division that naturally comes from confessing specific beliefs. But the problem is, holding to such worldviews isn't realistic or feasible. It sounds nice to say everyone gets to determine right and wrong for themselves—but would you hold to that thinking if someone burned down your house because it made them feel good? It sounds nice to say all belief systems are valid—but is it really feasible to be OK with someone claiming something as “my truth,” when their truth is diametrically opposed to what you believe?

The reality is, it's impossible to not be confessional. Even an atheist is confessional of their belief that there's nothing to believe in! As Jesus himself said, *“Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.”* And as Paul wrote in Romans, *“For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”* Our outward confession of faith naturally flows out of what's in our heart. So the question isn't, “Are we confessional?” Everyone is confessional about something. The question is, “What are our confessions built on?”

What we need to find then is a foundation for our confession of faith that is so solid, and gives us so much confidence, that we'll continue standing on it, no matter what earthly consequences or divisions doing so might cause. What gave the Lutherans at Augsburg such confidence to be confessional despite the danger? Their confession was built on God's Word!

Ultimately, every Christian and Christian Church has a confession of faith shaped by a varied combination different factors. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church referred to four different factors—**The Bible, Church Tradition/History, Human Reason, and Personal Experience.** Later, these were referred to as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” People's and churches' confession of faith is shaped by how much weight they give to these 4 different elements.

For example, the Catholic Church believes the Bible is the inspired Word of God, so that carries a lot of weight. However, the Catholic Church also teaches papal infallibility, giving the Pope the ability to declare new or changed doctrines, even there's no Biblical backing for it. So while the Bible is up here, Church Tradition is given equal weight. That's why Luther and the Reformers saw the need to reform the church and steer the focus back to Scripture!

Or consider charismatic churches like Pentecostals or Assembly of God. While they hold the Bible in high regard, they also heavily value human experience, valuing human emotions, and the experience of feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit through things like speaking in tongues and faith healings.

Or there's the mainline Protestant churches, whose view of Scripture has grown increasingly skeptical, while their reliance on human reason, logic, and the current cultural whims has grown increasingly stronger, leading them to doubt things like Creation, Jesus' Virgin birth, and anything in the Bible that's miraculous or supernatural. This basically turns Christianity into nothing but moralism—just try to be a good person.

But if you charted Confessional Lutheran churches like ours, The Bible is way up here, and the other three factors are towards the bottom! Like our Lutheran forefathers at Augsburg, our confession of faith must come from God's Word in the Bible—even when it disagrees with human reason; even when human emotions aren't sparked; even when the history of the church might disagree. The foundation on which our confession of faith stands—is fully and completely on the Word of God!

But why is that important? Isaiah's prophecy in our first reading gives us a couple reasons. As we said earlier, some churches base their confessions off human reason or logic, or what feels emotionally compelling. But in both of those systems, who becomes the arbiter of truth? Us. Our thoughts, feelings, and desires—which are all flawed and finite because of sin! But God says through Isaiah, *“My thoughts*

are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

Should it really surprise or offend us if the thoughts and ways of the all-powerful, all-knowing God of the Universe don't always line up perfectly with our own, or that of our culture? Wouldn't it be the epitome of egotistical pride to assume and insist that God should never disagree with us, act in a way we can't comprehend, or say or do something we'll wrestle with as humans? As the late Pastor Tim Keller said, ***“If your God never disagrees with you, you might just be worshiping an idealized version of yourself.”*** Isn't it a far more comforting to simply rely on God's Word and promises—even if it goes against our thoughts and desires, because we know that God is just that much more powerful, and that far beyond us?

Isaiah also shows us that we need to build our confession fully on God's Word, because God's Word works! God declares, ***“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”***

That's a compelling illustration, right? Rainwater and melting snow are necessary for watering the earth so that it can produce good fruit. Likewise, it's necessary that the Word of God waters our faith so we can produce a harvest of good spiritual fruit!

God promises that when we build our confession on his powerful Word, his will and purposes will be accomplished! God's Word works! So why build our confession on anything else? It would be pretty foolish for a farmer to pour sand, salt, or sugar on his crops to try to get them to grow! Those things won't help accomplish his desires for a good harvest, because they won't help crops grow. The same is true with our faith! We could build our confession of faith on any of those other factors we mentioned, but they won't strengthen our faith or

produce good spiritual fruit. Only God's powerful Word doesn't return empty.

And again, who is it that sends the rain and snow? God! I've never heard of a farmer just whipping up some water for himself during a drought! We rely on God to send the water we need. Likewise, God's also the one that's given us his Word. It comes from God's mouth, through the pens of the writers of Scripture. What greater confidence could we ask for than to know our confession of faith is based on the very Word of God himself?

And as those words of God do their work, we receive the greatest gift through it. As Paul says in Romans, ***“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”*** We need to build our confession on the Word of God, because it's that Gospel message the Holy Spirit works through to bring people to faith; faith, which connects us in to the forgiveness and salvation that Jesus won for us. The Holy Spirit doesn't do that work through human reason; or through our human emotions; or through the proclamations of church leaders, or the historical practices of the church. He does that work through God's Word!

That's why it's so important for us to remember what happened on June 25, 1530. As the Lutheran reformers stood firmly on their confession of faith, we're shown the example of our confessional heritage. Like them, we can also boldly confess our faith with full confidence, standing firm on God's Word found in Scripture, permeated by the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. 493 years later, our confidence remains the same. ***“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”***