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Sermon Series: What Does It Mean to be a Lutheran?

This Sermon: Treatise on the Power & Primacy of the Pope (Mt 16:13-20, Jn 20:22-23)

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In the history of religious groups, and among Christian as well as non-Christian churches, the basic question of “Who’s in charge around here?” has been particularly important. Among followers of Islam, there are two main branches of Muslims – the Sunni and the Shiite groups, who often do not get along at all. They are in disagreement on who is in charge or who *should* be in charge of the Muslim world. The

Sunni branch believes that the first four caliphs--Mohammed's successors--rightfully took Mohammed’s place as the leaders of Muslims. Shiites, in contrast, believe that only the heirs of the fourth caliph, Ali, are the legitimate successors of Mohammed. Among Mormons, a similar thing happened. Today we have the more commonly known Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints headquartered in Salt Lake, City, Utah. But there is also the *Reorganized* Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints headquartered in Independence, Missouri (which in 2001 changed its name to “Community of Christ”). But why are there two Mormon groups? Well, some recognized Brigham Young as the legitimate successor and leader of Mormons after the death of Joseph Smith, while others believed only Joseph Smith’s son, also named Joseph, should be the religious leader. By answering the question, “Who’s in charge around here?” in different ways, people ended up in two different groups.

Among Christians, one would think that this kind of tug-of-war would not be common or significant. After all, Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of all, and his Word, the Bible, is the source and standard of all authority in the church – right? Well, not exactly. Some major splits have taken place and still prevail within Christendom over the question of who is in charge and who has authority in the church. When the group now known as the Roman Catholic Church gravitated toward the bishop of Rome as the religious authority and also declared church traditions and papal decrees to be as authoritative as the Bible statements are, those now known as Eastern Orthodox churches went their separate way with their own archbishop and set of authoritative writings and sources of dogma. Partly for religious and partly for political reasons, the Anglican Church set up its own version of church hierarchy and vested their bishops and the Archbishop of Canterbury with high privilege and power. Even among Protestant Christian groups, where the “Bible alone” and “Christ alone” are formally identified as the only authorities for doctrine and practice, the question, “Who’s in charge around here?” remained crucial. Some thought that the spiritual authority over members of local churches should be vested in the bishops, others said this authority is better placed with the elders, and yet others wanted the power left with the congregation to decide what worked best. So we ended up with “Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists” who were called by these names because of the different ways they answered the same basic question, “Who’s in charge around here?”

Well, what about Lutheran? How do Lutherans answer that question about authority and power and the right to determine doctrine or bind consciences? This morning we continue our sermon series under the theme, What does it Mean to be a Lutheran? As in previous weeks we will focus on one of the confessional writings that Lutherans set forth to the world as an expression of what we believe and teach. The writing chosen for

today is perhaps the least well-known of all the Lutheran Confessions, the **Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope**. Historically, the work was written by Philip Melanchthon in February of 1537, when Lutheran princes and theologians were assembled at Smalcald. This Treatise (sometimes simply referred to as “the Tractate” or “the Treatise”) was ratified and agreed to as an appendix to the Augsburg Confession, but historically has been considered part of Luther’s Smalcald Articles because both documents came out of the Smalcald assembly.

And what is the main subject of this Treatise? It has mostly to do with position and power within the Christian church – yep, it deals with the “Who’s in charge around here?” question. In its historical context, the Reformers were wrestling with the hierarchical medieval church that was soon to become the Roman Catholic Church through the decrees of the Council of Trent a decade later. The Treatise sets forth Bible studies and historical reasons why three dogmas of the Catholics are **not** true and should **not** be taught or believed among Christians. Stated briefly, the Treatise declares and shows from Scripture that (1) the pope is not head of the Christian Church and superior to all other bishops by divine right; (2) the pope and bishops do not hold civil authority over governments by divine right; and (3) the claim of the Catholic hierarchy that obedience to the pope is necessary for salvation is invalid since it contradicts the Bible doctrine of justification through faith in Christ alone and it undermines the Christian gospel.

A couple of Bible sections receive a lot of attention in this Treatise and they deserve our attention as well. I speak of Matthew 16:13-19 and John 20:21-23. Here are the main parts of those Bible sections: **[Jesus] asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Now to John 20) Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”**

For centuries the pope had claimed (and still does) that Jesus gave special, primary power and privilege to dispense forgiveness or withhold forgiveness to Simon Peter, and not to all the disciples. The papacy also then claims that he, the bishop of Rome, is the legitimate successor of Peter who supposedly served as the first bishop of Rome. The Treatise, in response to this, moves point by point through the Bible and then even in church history, to show that these claims are wrong. They are wrong biblically and they are wrong historically. There are plenty of Bible passages that refute the idea of the pope being any God-given authority on earth to rule over consciences, and there are plenty of statements from early church fathers that refute the idea that the bishop of Rome was recognized as inheriting any such power or privilege from God.

With a careful study of New Testament texts and their contexts, the Treatise shows that Jesus was asking ALL the disciples, not just Simon Peter, who they thought he was. Jesus uses a plural word here and is asking, “Who do **all of you** say I am?” Typical of his personality and boldness, Simon Peter provides an answer – one that surely expresses his own convictions that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and promised Savior of the world. But this is also what the other disciples believed, since the Holy Spirit had worked that faith in their hearts. Then when Jesus says, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,” he uses two similar

yet distinctively different words to make his point. The name “Peter” is in Greek *petros* which means rock or stone. “You are Peter, which means a rock or stone” says Jesus. But then he says, “On this rock I will build my church” – and someone might immediately conclude that he was saying, “I will build my church on you, Peter, on you, a rock.” But Jesus actually used a different word at that time, one that is no longer referring to Simon Peter. When he said he’ll build his church “on this rock” he used the Greek word *petra*, which mean a large rock formation, bedrock, or large cliff or formation like the “Rock of Gibraltar.” He wasn’t saying that Simon Peter was bad or unimportant to him, but that the foundation of his church was something much stronger, more durable, and appropriate – the rock-solid truth that Peter had just confessed on behalf of the believing disciples. This confession of faith, this rock-solid set of convictions centered in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ – that is the foundation the Christian Church rests on. And the power or authority to announce forgiveness to people in Christ’s name – or to withhold forgiveness to people who will not repent – belongs to any and all Christians who share this faith and confession of faith.

For people who may not be 100% sure about this understanding of what Matthew 16 is saying, the Treatise does the right thing. It presents other evidence from other places of the Bible itself to show this is what Jesus meant and how the original disciples and apostolic church understood his words. That’s where John 20 is mentioned. The risen Jesus, following his crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection, appears to all the disciples. To all of them, not just to Simon Peter, Jesus says, **“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”** This is the same language of Matthew 16. This is the same privilege and power that other parts of the New Testament give to all disciples, all followers of Jesus Christ. In Matthew chapter 18 Jesus specifically gives “the church” – all believers – this power to forgive or refuse forgiveness. In the book of Acts and in the New Testament epistles, there is no hint or suggestion that only some but not all true Christians have and share this power and these privileges. Peter himself certainly never indicated this in his two New Testament epistles.

And what does all this mean for us today, as professing Christians and members of Christian churches? We Lutherans believe it means a great deal. We believe that every Christian has the right and privilege to confess his or her sins to each other, to assure each other of forgiveness for the sake of Christ’s life and death for us, and to tell the impenitent sinners that they are not forgiven but are tragically forfeiting personal blessing from Christ’s as long as they cling to sin more than they cling to Jesus. It means that when we ask the question, “Who’s in charge around here?” we answer without hesitation, “Jesus Christ and his Word the Bible, specifically the gospel of forgiveness for sinners.” Aside from the Word of God there is no real or divinely established authority. God makes it very clear that he wants Christians to gather together as “church” and to call or ask fellow Christians to serve as pastors, teachers, and other servants of the gospel with various assignments. But these so-called “public ministers” who serve on behalf of fellow believers, do not have any more or less power or authority than any other Christian has. They all have the Bible. They all use the authority of Christ when they speak and apply that Word to others. That’s what the Treatise emphasizes and that is what we believe and teach.

And in our limited time this morning maybe only one more thing can be stressed. The Treatise makes the point that whenever people make it **necessary for salvation** that Christians obey a human authority (like the pope) other than the Savior and his gospel, they contradict the true gospel and turn hearts from the most important treasure on earth. In making us right with God Jesus has done it all and done it perfectly – and nothing else is necessary to be added to this, like obedience to human church authorities. When the Holy

Spirit, through the gospel, brings the sinner to rely on Christ's saving work alone for forgiveness and eternal life, nothing else is needed for that blessing to be enjoyed. You and I are indeed sinners and we know that. You and I were also redeemed and saved from our guilt by Jesus and we know that too. You and I were brought by God to embrace and rejoice in that good news of pardon and peace through Christ. That's the foundation on which the Christian church stands and no other foundation is needed or desired. That would be out of place. We have it all through Jesus and his Word. And that's who is really in charge around here!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you have called us from sin to salvation, from unbelief to faith, from being your enemies to being your people, your church. Point us constantly to the foundation on which we stand, Christ and his truth. Keep us from spiritual tyranny that would bind our consciences to human authorities in the church, rob you of your glory, and distort the gospel of free and full forgiveness. Give us a healthy appreciation for our Lutheran heritage that insists that our teaching and practice be solidly based on Scripture alone. Also hear us as we pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.