

5th Sunday after Trinity/Presentation of the A.C. (475th anniversary)
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June 26, 2005
Our Savior Lutheran Church
Grand Rapids, MI

+Jesu juva!+

1 Kings 19:11-21; Augsburg Confession article 7
The Hidden Church

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. DEARLY BELOVED:

Today is a day of great rejoicing, and yet our attention is focused also on Elijah, the sad prophet. It is a day of great rejoicing, since the Augsburg Confession, the foundational confession of the Lutheran Church is 475 years old. Yet our attention is also focused on Elijah's grief. Elijah thinks the Church is dead, and yet God comforts Him with the knowledge that the true Church lives, even though it is hidden. So today we *rejoice*, and we are also *comforted* by the Word of our Lord.

On June 25, 1530, the Augsburg Confession was read publicly before the Holy Roman Emperor at a political conference in Augsburg, Germany. It was a confession which clearly stated where the Reformation churches and pastors stood with regard to nearly all questions of the Christian faith. Martin Luther's colleague and friend, Philip Melancthon was the author of the Augsburg Confession, and Luther was quite happy with his work. Luther wrote, "I have read Master Philip's Apology. I am well pleased with it, and know nothing to improve or to change in it; neither would this be proper, since I cannot step so gently and softly. Christ, our Lord, grant that it may produce much and great fruit, which, indeed, we hope and pray for. Amen." (St. L. 16,657). The Lutheran theologians and princes were risking their lives in making this confession. They were resisting the emperor and pope, and could have lost their lands or lives for doing this. Nine years previously, Luther had been excommunicated by the pope and declared an outlaw – free game for anyone to kill. The Lutherans at Augsburg probably expected this as well. Yet the reading of the Augsburg Confession on June 25, 1530 caused the emperor and others to deal with the Lutherans mildly. It provided a form of Lutheran unity, and became the touchstone of what it means to be an evangelical Lutheran. This is a cause of rejoicing. We should give thanks to God that for 475 years he has allowed such a clear summary of Holy Scripture to exist on earth. We should thank Him for allowing the light of Scripture to shine upon us through the Augsburg Confession.

At Augsburg in 1530, before the Augsburg Confession was presented, the Lutherans may have felt like they were very few, and that their opponents were very many. They may have felt like the true Church was on the brink of destruction. Many centuries before, the prophet Elijah felt the same way. Elijah prays to God, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your proph-

ets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." (1 Kgs. 19:14). To Elijah, it seems like the true Church is on the brink of destruction. But God sees things differently. God does not want Elijah to trust in external numbers or visible success. God comforts Elijah with the knowledge that the Church has not died out. He says, "I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." (1 Kgs. 19:18). The external, visible Church of Israel had become idolatrous and false-believing. But God comforts Elijah with the knowledge that the true Church is not always visible. Sometimes the true Church goes underground, in hiding. The true Church, whether Old Testament or New Testament, is still concrete and real, made up of real people receiving God's holy Words and holy things from true priests and/or preachers. But it's hidden now. You can't always look at Israel and say, There's the true Church. Instead, you can recognize the true Church where people are worshipping God the right way, and receiving His gifts as He set them up to be given and received.

And this is exactly what our Augsburg Confession teaches us. Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession is entitled, "Of the Church," and it says this: "1] Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. 2] And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and 3] the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. 4] As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4, 5, 6." Notice these two facts: First, the one holy Church will continue forever. Second, the Church is defined not by who its fathers are or who it is in communion with, but by the Gospel and the Sacraments. Where the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered, that's where the one true Church is. Sometimes you can point to a church body and say, There it is, the one church body which has the pure doctrine and practice. But at other times there is no one church body to which you can point. Instead, right-believing congregations and pastors are scattered here and there, hidden from one another and from the world, like the 7000 in Israel who did not bow the knee to Baal. It is the right Gospel and Sacraments that define and point out the true Church. And thanks be to God, this Church, wherever it may be, will never die.

In both the OT and the NT, God promises that the Church will live and survive. There will always be orthodox, right-believing teachers and believers. But that never gives us the ability to point to an external institution and to say – That's the Church, therefore it is correct, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. As LCMS Lutherans our temptation is to point to the LCMS and claim that past faithfulness guarantees present and future faithfulness. Perhaps Roman Catholics are tempted to see their communion with the Pope as being a guarantee that

they are the one true Church. The Eastern Orthodox may also be tempted to see their communion with the patriarch of Constantinople in the same way. They may think, "Christ promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church. We are the Church, because our bishops are successors of faithful bishops of old. Therefore the gates of hell cannot prevail against our church body." As Lutherans, it's important for us to see that God promises to preserve for Himself a Church—a gathering of right-believing preachers and hearers. God's promises do not identify one or the other institution or society as *the* one and only Church which cannot err, and against whom the gates of hell cannot prevail. The case of Elijah is a comfort for us. Even when we cannot see *any* right-believing institution, society, church body, or synod, God still has "7000" who have not bowed the knee to Baal or to any of Baal's false doctrines. We may not know where they are, but God knows, and that's enough.

St. Peter in today's epistle reading, gives us a perfect summary for today's festivities. He writes first of all, "Sanctify the Lord Christ in your hearts," (v. 15). We sanctify Him when we remember all that He did for us—His becoming human, His taking upon Himself our sins, His bloody sweat and passion, His precious death and burial, His glorious resurrection and ascension, His sitting at the right hand of God and His return to judgment. When you with faith trust in all that He did for you, you are truly sanctifying Him in your hearts. This faithful remembering is what Elijah the prophet did, as He trusted in God's promises. And this faithful remembering leads to St. Peter's other statement. "And always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (v. 15). From faith springs confession, that is, "a defense," or "a reason for the hope that is in you." This is what we celebrate today—475 years of the Augsburg Confession—truly a defense and statement of the hope that is us, the hope that relies on Christ's cross and empty tomb for the free forgiveness of sins. This is a cause for rejoicing. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.