

In my sermon last week, I talked about superheroes. Surprisingly, the first man with superpowers we heard about was a man possessed by demons who gave him superhuman strength. However, he was not a superhero. Just a victim of Satan and his deceptions.

The real superhero was obviously Jesus. Yet, he displayed his heroism not in physical, worldly strength, but in spiritual strength. The strength to cast out demons. The strength to forgive sins. The strength to sacrifice himself on the cross. This wasn't heroism like we see in movies, but it was a far more heroic act than any the world had seen before or since.

The church today often sets up Jesus as a superhero for his act of love and salvation toward us. And it's perfectly appropriate that we do so. What the church doesn't do – or at least, what most protestant churches don't do – is look to any other people in the Bible as heroes of the faith. Outside of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, it seems like Christians today are hesitant about recognizing or admiring anyone as a saint.

And that's unfortunate. And, frankly, unbiblical. Because we are commanded by St Paul to do exactly that. In Philippians 3:17, Paul tells us, *“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”* He tells us, in no uncertain terms: imitate me. Imitate men like me. Keep your eyes on our example. He commands us to have heroes of the faith. He may not use the word “saints,” but that's what he's talking about.

At least, that's what he's talking about for Lutherans like us. Because even though we gather today to remember Saint Peter and Saint Paul, we do not gather to worship them. They were not flawless men. Paul tells us to keep our eyes on the example we have in them. But that's not an example of moral perfection.

It's the example of their faith. Faith that clings to Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness, salvation, and life. We honor the saints because they point beyond themselves. They point to Christ. That is what the Church celebrates today. We give thanks for the apostles Peter and Paul because in their confession, in their preaching, and even in their repentance, they teach us the same Gospel that is our hope today: Christ alone is our Savior.

We heard today from Matthew 16. Jesus asks His disciples the most important question any person can ever answer: *“Who do you say that I am?”* And Peter, speaking by faith revealed from heaven, makes the good confession: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*

That confession is the foundation of the Church. The Church does not rest on the personality of Peter, as though his courage, his leadership, or his ability could save anyone. No, the Church is built on the confession of Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and Son of God. That confession, revealed by the Father, is what makes Peter a “rock.” Peter himself is weak, as we see later when he denies Jesus three times. But the confession God gave him is strong enough to withstand hell itself.

That same confession still builds the Church today. We confess it every Sunday, every time we gather: *“I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord... I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God.”* The world tries to shift the church's foundation to other things. To human opinions, feelings, good works, tolerance, even political power. But those are sinking sand. The true Church stands on Christ, the Son of the living God, crucified for sinners and raised again. That is the rock that will never crumble.

But God did not build His Church only among the Jews. The risen Lord sent the Gospel into all the world. And so He raised up Paul, once an enemy and persecutor, now a chosen instrument to proclaim Jesus to the Gentiles.

In Galatians 2, Paul describes how he came to Jerusalem to make sure the Gospel he preached was the same Gospel the apostles in Jerusalem confessed. And it was! One Gospel for Jew and Gentile alike.

There were people who tried to add to the Gospel. False brothers who wanted to bind the Gentiles to circumcision and the laws of Moses, as though Christ's sacrifice were not enough. But Paul would not allow it. He would not yield for a moment, because the truth of the Gospel was at stake.

That's what saints do. They don't invent new truths. They don't seek to glorify themselves. They defend, proclaim, and deliver the truth they received to the next generation of saints. They stand firm on grace alone, faith alone, the Word alone, even when it costs them their comfort, their peace, their very lives.

And that brings us to one more marvelous thing. Though Peter and Paul had different missions — Peter to the circumcised, Paul to the Gentiles — they were not two churches. They were one. Paul writes that the other apostles gave him the right hand of fellowship. There was one faith, one baptism, one Lord... one Gospel of Jesus Christ. And still today, whether in Africa or Asia, Europe or the Americas, whether among the simplest villages or the greatest cities, the Church has one confession: *"Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

It's easy to see saints like Peter and Paul as larger-than-life. Yet they were men like us: Peter denied the Lord and wept bitterly. Paul called himself the chief of sinners. They knew the burden of their own weakness. But they also knew the glory of Christ's forgiveness, freely given. They teach us to trust Christ's promises above all.

And so the saints are models, but not models of moral perfection under the Law. They are not heroes who stand before us wagging their fingers, demanding that we measure up to their example, as if salvation depended on our own efforts.

No, the saints are heroes of the Gospel. They show us what it means to be rescued by Christ, what it means to be forgiven, what it means to be sanctified and strengthened for service by God's own gracious work. They are living witnesses to the power of God's mercy.

Peter shows us that though you may fall terribly the love of Christ restores you, lifts you up, and calls you again to confess Him before the world. Paul shows us that no matter how violently you may have opposed Christ, His grace can still find you, convert you, and send you to carry His name far and wide.

They do not place the burden of the Law upon your back, as if to say, "Be as brave, as strong, and as noble as we were." Instead they place before your eyes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world... their sin and yours. They show us the only One who is perfect: Christ crucified and risen for sinners. They are heroes not because they kept the Law perfectly, but because the Law drove them to the cross and the Gospel raised them up to new life.

That is why they are models worth imitating: they teach us to cling to Christ alone, to depend on His righteousness alone, and to live boldly in His forgiveness. They point us to the only foundation on which the Church stands, and the only hope that will never fail.

So today, we do not worship Saint Peter and Saint Paul. We do not idolize them. We do not glorify them as demigods.

No, we honor them. Remember them. Emulate them. And we thank God for giving them to us as living examples of His grace. And as fellow disciples of Jesus, we imitate them by holding to Christ, the Son of the living God, as our only hope. That is how the Church endures. That is how the gates of hell do not prevail against her.

We praise God that the same Gospel that saved Peter and Paul still saves us. And we rejoice to confess with them, in the unity of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* Amen.