

THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Text: St. Matthew 7:15-23

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

What do wolves look like? I am not talking about the furry, canine creatures that roam the forests. I am referring to the same wolves of which our LORD speaks in our Gospel text today. That is, I am referring to spiritual wolves—to false prophets, as our LORD calls them. What, do you imagine, they look like? Is it possible that one may be recognized by his or her dress? How about lifestyle? Is it possible to recognize spiritual wolves by their outward works or their lifestyle?

The answer is quite simple really. The answer is no; you cannot recognize spiritual wolves by dress, works, or even, oftentimes their words. No, for JESUS tells us that they will be dressed in sheep's clothing. To all appearances, they will be holy and good. That is part of their deception. You see, appearances and even works themselves can and do deceive. JESUS tells us, *“Beware of false prophets, who come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”*

But if one cannot recognize a false prophet by what he wears or by the works he does, or even by their words, how do we recognize them? Whom are these false prophets disguised in sheep's clothing? What *is* their fruit?

When JESUS tells us to *“Beware of false prophets...”* implicit in His warning is that there is a truth that one can know. And if there is a truth which one can know, and there is, then it follows that there is also a lie which one can know. But how do we recognize the difference?

“Beware of false prophets,” for it is the way of Satan, the father of all lies, to dress up his lies in half-truths. It is his habit to appear noble, honorable, and virtuous. Holy Scripture, itself, tells us that he often appears as an *“angel of light”* and what's more, *“his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness.”* Yes, *“Beware of false prophets,”* for if there is a truth, then there are teachers of the truth, and if there are lies and half-truths then they, too, have their teachers.

St. Paul tells us that false prophets are to be found even in the Church, for as we heard from his words to the congregation in Ephesus, *“...after my departure savage wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.”*

You see, false prophets worm their way in among us in the guise of righteousness, wearing a mantle of sheep's clothing. JESUS' imagery here is quite interesting. Many believe that JESUS is referring to the Old Testament practice of the prophets who would wear a mantle of sheepskin upon their shoulders as a symbol of divine authority. This sheepskin served as a sign that the prophet held the preaching office conferred upon him by God and he therefore had authority to speak as one who speaks the Word of God for God.

“Beware of false prophets, who come in sheep's clothing...” that is, beware of those who come to you claiming to be in the service of the LORD, to be doing the LORD's work, when in truth they serve the devil. They cover themselves with the Word of God, but it is no more than a veneer. They preach and quote Holy Scripture and claim to have the truth.

But listen closely. They quote the Word of God out of context and temper and season its meaning with human wisdom. They may be nice people. They may look like servants of the LORD. They may be those who are called preachers and teachers in the Church. They may even wear a collar and a robe and a stole and a chasuble. But beware, because if they do not teach the truth, if they do not preach JESUS CHRIST alone and Him crucified, then they are nothing more than ravenous wolves.

They may be people who take noble stands on moral issues, but deny the full sufficiency of JESUS' death on the Cross to save us by adding to His all-atoning sacrifice our own good works for salvation and thus stealing away the glory of CHRIST. They may be people who add to the work of CHRIST our own work of giving our hearts to Him, committing our life to Him, and by our own reason and strength following Him. Making a *“decision for CHRIST”* as it were.

They may be people who claim to be full of the Spirit, but then reject the work of the HOLY SPIRIT in God's Holy Word and His blessed Sacraments of Baptism and the LORD's Supper, as well as His gracious pronouncement of absolution through your pastor. In this manner, they steal away the very means by which God seeks to give the saving benefits of CHRIST's death and resurrection to His people.

They may even be people like the Lutheran pastor who turns the church from a house of prayer into a house of “spiritual” entertainment, self-help, and man-centered piety, in the mistaken belief that the Church must become like the culture around it to save souls, instead of transforming the culture around it.

Those who engage in such things may truly be sincere, but they are sincerely wrong and sincerely in danger! They are in danger because what they believe and

practice leads not to life, but to death—not to the Cross of CHRIST and His salvation, but to death and the grave. Jesus also warns us, *“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.”*

I could add names to each false teaching I have mentioned, but I have learned that that really serves no purpose. Giving you the names of false teachers would only offend many of you and you would stop listening to me while you stew in your pew that I should be so offensive or judgmental. You would be offended because you mistakenly invite these false teachers and their false teaching into your homes in books, on the radio, and on television. You would be offended because you are under the mistaken assumption that any message that mentions JESUS must be a good message.

But what did St. Paul have to say to the Church in Galatia? *“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.”* St. Paul was so adamant about this message that he said the same thing in two verses back to back. And when he said *“let them be accursed”* he meant, *“Let them be damned! Let them go to hell.”*

In 1 John 4, we read, *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”* Thus, we are to test the spirits, not blindly follow everyone, everything, and every word that comes our way. And St. John goes on to say that the way that one does that is by judging what the prophets teach. He says, *“Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of CHRIST”* that is, the teachings of CHRIST, *“does not have God.”*

We are to judge all prophets by their fruits. Specifically, John states that anyone who rejects as true God in the flesh, fully human and yet, fully divine, is not of God. Those who deny JESUS’ coming in the flesh, the offering up of His Body on the Cross to save us, His resurrection in the Body, His saving grace in the waters of Holy Baptism, His literal coming to us now in His Body and Blood in the Sacrament of the altar—those who contradict any or all of these things are false prophets.

St. John comes on even more strongly when he says, *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him.”* Whoever teaches contrary to the truth of CHRIST’s Word is a wolf—a false prophet. These are their fruits and *“By their fruits you will know them.”*

You may ask just how you can judge what is true. My only answer to you is that you must read your Bible and study your Catechism—not only when you study to be confirmed, as though studying the doctrines of God is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, not even only once a week, but every day. For in the Holy Scripture alone, will you find the

Words of eternal life, and in the Catechism you will find a true and right explanation of God's fundamental truths.

Armed with God's Word and a right understanding of JESUS' teachings you are defended against any false prophet and any false doctrine which seek to contradict the saving power of the Gospel.

Unfortunately, studying the Word of God is not what we really want to do. Therefore St. Paul writes to St. Timothy, *"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."*

But false prophets cannot deceive people who will not listen to them, because they know the truth from a lie. Wolves cannot tear at the faith and ravage the souls of those who will not hear them, nor can they preach blasphemy against the Word of God unless someone wants to hear such things because it scratches their itching ears and pleases their reason, flattering their wisdom.

But friends, human wisdom is no wisdom at all, not when it comes to the truths of Holy Scripture. For this reason, we stand on Scripture alone. All other wisdom, when it comes to our salvation, stands on the shifting sand of folly and will be swept away by the wrath of a perfectly righteous and just God. All those who stubbornly insist on following their own way, or the wisdom of the world, will one day hear JESUS say, *"I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"*

So turn to the Word of God and judge with righteousness. For God speaks His Word to you by His HOLY SPIRIT *"...that you may believe that JESUS is the CHRIST, the SON of God, and that believing you may have life in His Name."* It is only in the Words of Holy Scripture that you will hear of a God who so loves the world *"that He gave His only begotten SON, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

It is only in the Words of Holy Scripture that you will come to know the one true God, FATHER, SON, and HOLY SPIRIT; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Moses, David, Elijah, and Elisha, and all the prophets. It is only in Holy Scripture that you will come to know the God of the Apostles and learn all things that He commanded them. And with these "things," you will be armed for battle against all false prophets—all wolves in sheep's clothing—with their deadly false teachings.

Only in the Words of Holy Scripture will you come to know that Jesus is *"the Way, the Truth, and the Life,"* and *"no one comes unto the FATHER except through*

[Him].” Jesus’ way is the way of the Cross, and the Cross is the only way to salvation. It is to this we must cling. It is through the Cross of JESUS that we find our entrance into light and life. The Cross of JESUS is the narrow gate that leads to our resurrection and eternal life with Him on the final Day.

For there on the Cross, did JESUS conquer the lies of the devil and every deceiving false prophet. And it is there on the Cross that JESUS conquered eternal death by crucifying there with Him all our sins. There they died and in His tomb, they were buried with Him. And when JESUS arose from the sleep of death on that first Easter morning, there they remained with the burial shroud.

The Cross of JESUS is truly the Tree of Life that bears the only truly Good Fruit. For from its branches hung the Body of our Lord who there gave up for us His very Body and Blood for our salvation. Here today you are given to partake of this Fruit in our LORD’s Holy Supper where JESUS is your true Prophet, Priest, and King, who has fulfilled all prophecy. By this very Fruit, you know Him and by this Fruit, you receive the mercy of God.

“Beware of false prophets...” But do not let your hearts be troubled. Our LORD’s warning is not meant to frighten you, but to enlighten you so that you will not be deceived, but find comfort and strength in His Word of Life. There, you will know His compassion and there you will learn to recognize His true prophets. Do not be afraid, but hear Him say, *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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