

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.

It is truly meet, right, and salutary that the Church has chosen this text to be heard every eighth Sunday after Trinity. Yet the particular Sunday of its preaching does not matter as much as its content and meaning. *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”*

It is good because it serves to remind you that as a Christian you are called upon, as is your Christian duty, to judge doctrine, that is, to judge the content of what is taught from this pulpit and in our classrooms, using the Word of God as your clear and unshakable standard. You are to *“test the spirits,”* St. John writes, even as St. Paul cautions the Christian congregation in Thessalonica, *“Test all things; hold fast what is good.”*

Yet, within the Church, we find two kinds of sheep: those who willingly and gladly hear the Word of God and keep it, and those who refuse to listen at all. That is, those who study and search the Scriptures, testing the words of those appointed over them as their shepherds, and those who cover themselves in the righteousness of their own works and wisdom refusing to hear, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word of God that they may instead follow the siren song of the fallen world with its myriad false gods and false teachings because it is more in line with their own sinful desires.

This is so because to hear the Word of God is not what most of us prefer to do, and to obey the Word of God we desire even less. However, false prophets cannot deceive a people who are too well informed to listen to them, and spiritual wolves cannot tear the flesh and ravage the soul of those who will not hear them. Neither can their heresies deceive the sheep unless they are willing to hear and accept such things because it scratches their itching ears by pleasing their own reason and flattering their own 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 taking God at His Word. All other wisdom, when it comes to our salvation, stands on the shifting sand of human folly and will be swept away by the wrath of a perfectly righteous and just God.

Just as there are two kinds of sheep, so too, are there two kinds of prophets or shepherds. One cannot discern the difference between the two simply by outward appearance. Indeed, our LORD warns against the deception of sheep’s clothing. The wolves may be nice; they may even mean well. Our LORD warns that they will look and act just like other sheep.

Of false prophets, JESUS has said, *“You will know them by their fruits.”* But just what are their fruits? Are we speaking here of their lifestyle and what we can see by their outward works? No, for JESUS tells us that they will be dressed in sheep’s clothing, and thus, to all appearances, they will be holy and good. That is part of their deception. JESUS also said, *“For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”* Thus, we know that works themselves can and do deceive.

The great irony is that the wolves do works that to all outward appearances are good. Their sermons may seem more relevant, their teaching more winsome, their worship more engaging, relaxed, and entertaining, and their congregations growing and vibrant. They may even work hard to get bad trees to produce good fruit. Yet, even if they could perform wonders like Sts. Peter or Paul, or even CHRIST Himself, none of these would be enough. These do not gain one entrance into heaven and no amount of teaching, cajoling, admonishing, or demanding that the other sheep do the same will either. Bad trees cannot produce good fruit. *“Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?”* Bad trees can only bear bad fruit.

Thus, does our LORD say, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘LORD, LORD,’ shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My FATHER in Heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘LORD, LORD, have we not prophesied in Your Name, cast out demons in Your Name, and done many wonders in Your Name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”* There is no more terrifying prospect.

Therefore, to follow false prophets and the crowds that follow them is to be nothing more than lemmings running over a cliff. The broad, easy road of do-it-yourself religion that so great a number of would-be Christians are traveling, the road paved with good intentions, can only lead to one place—straight to hell.

You see, the true Church on this side of Heaven smells of Blood—the Blood of our LORD, JESUS CHRIST. It is this Blood, Blood flowing from our LORD’s pierced side, that has opened the door to Heaven for all who will believe. To believe in anything else, to preach anything else as the foundation of our salvation, is to preach nothing more than death. All our works, all our good intentions, none are good enough. Without faith in the Sacrifice of CHRIST JESUS on the Cross of Calvary for the forgiveness of our sins, one cannot be saved. Despite our good works or our good intentions, without faith, one cannot be saved.

Therefore, our LORD has entrusted His Word of Law and Gospel to another kind of prophet, another kind of shepherd. He has commanded new shepherds to speak the truth *“in and out of season.”* He wants His people to know the will of His FATHER. The LORD wants His Word to be taught and His doctrine to be learned. He desires His psalms to be sung, His Scripture verses to be memorized, and His doctrines taken to heart—His Word that crushes the Old Adam in us, and His Word that comforts the new man who daily comes forth in the gracious waters of Holy Baptism. That is what He would have preached. JESUS, our Good Shepherd, would not have His Church nor any of His children, go without such teaching. Because sheep, when they are neglected by their shepherds, are left to be scattered and devoured by wild beasts.

So many times, in visiting another congregation while traveling I have heard someone say, *“I really love this church. I can be relaxed, the worship is exciting, and the preacher makes the Word of God relevant to me.”* Yet, even as I hear such accolades after having attended what has been passed off as Christian worship and having been left feeling empty, I begin to wonder if such a person is only making excuses for attending worship in a church they know better than to attend; a church where the pastor teaches and preaches little more than pabulum and cannot be identified from the other sheep by anything more than his pasted on smile and overzealous greeting.

Sadly, 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 death. 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.”*

The Apostle, St. Paul had this to say when he warned the congregation founded in Corinth about the topic of which we speak to this day: *“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of CHRIST. And no wonder! For, Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”*

False prophets come not as flagrant deceivers and murderers. Such a thing would be too easy for a Christian to recognize, identify, and avoid. No, instead they come in beauty, even as angels of light, appearing to be holy and good. Yet, in that camouflage lays great danger, for falsehood is far more dangerous when it is wrapped up in what appears to be the truth.

So, *“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, whether they are aware of it or not. They cover themselves with the Word of God, but it is no more than a thin 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 its meaning and season its truth with human wisdom. They may be nice people. They may look like servants of the LORD. They may be those who are called preachers, teachers, and even doctors of the Church. They may even wear a collar and a robe, 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 for the forgiveness of sins, 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 steal away the glory of CHRIST. They may be people who add to the work of CHRIST our own work of giving our heart to Him, of 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 Holy

Eucharist, as well as His gracious and merciful 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 men's souls, instead of transforming the culture around the Church with the Gospel of Truth.

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. Heed our LORD's warning as He also said, *“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.”*

So, if false prophets cannot reliably be recognized by their works, how does one recognize them? They are recognized by their doctrine, that is, by their teaching. The only way one can know if a prophet is from the LORD is whether or not he speaks the Word of the LORD according to the truth of Holy Scripture.

Specifically, St. John states that anyone who rejects that JESUS is true God in the flesh, fully human and 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 literal coming to us now in His Body and Blood in the Sacrament, that JESUS is the only way unto salvation—those who contradict any or all of these things are false prophets. And just as surely, those who insist that we must interpret God's Word according to contemporary cultural values are false prophets as well. St. John hammers this truth home when he writes, *“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 in sheep's clothing. *“By their fruits, you will know them.”*

If you would be protected from false prophets then read your Bible and know your Catechism by heart; pray and meditate upon them in your devotions day by day and week by week. In these are given to you the Words of God and an explanation of the fundamental teachings of the Holy Scriptures; all that you need to know and believe to be saved. There you will find God's holy Word and a true and right explanation of God's holy Law and Gospel by which you are brought to repentance and faith in CHRIST JESUS. As we receive and hold to this teaching, we receive God, FATHER, SON, and HOLY SPIRIT, and are defended against any false teaching which seeks to contradict it. By meditating upon and clinging to this truth, we learn to recognize error and reject it.

Likewise, know the Creeds. Not only do they state what we believe, but they also implicitly state what we reject. They are like fortress walls guarding and upholding the truth of God's Word. Even though the Creeds are ancient, they remain relevant and practical. For example, when someone tells you that you need a second Baptism in the HOLY SPIRIT, you can

respond with the words of the Nicene Creed, *“I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.”* And that, like all of the Creed, simply reflects the Words of Holy Scripture, *“One LORD, one faith, one Baptism”*

If you are wondering whether or not someone is a false teacher, ask yourself this: *“Is the teaching of this man in keeping with the faith of the Apostolic Church as confessed in the Creeds? Is it consistent with what I have learned of sin, CHRIST, and faith in the Small Catechism? Does it agree with the preaching of the Word of God as written in Holy Scripture and preached in my church? Does it keep the salvific work of CHRIST at the center of all things?”* If not, then beware of it, flee from it. Do not walk; run! Remember JESUS’ words, *“Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”*

Yet, do not run blindly, flee to CHRIST, take refuge in Him, and give attention to His Word. Follow that narrow Way, which is JESUS Himself, who said, *“I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.”* Go to that narrow gate which is the Cross. For through the Cross of CHRIST is our entrance to light and life for it is the door unto Heaven.

The Cross of CHRIST is the only gate that leads to the resurrection. For there on the Cross JESUS conquered the lies of the devil and the death which sin brings. Believing in Him, you are completely forgiven. You are raised to new life in Him. That is the truth; the whole truth; and nothing but the truth, so help me God.

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.”* Only in the Words of Holy Scripture will you hear of our God who loved the world in such a way *“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. With these *“things”* you will be armed for battle against all false prophets 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 that *“no one comes unto the FATHER except through [Him].”* JESUS’ way is the way of the Cross. It is to this, that we must cling. 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, JESUS conquered the lies of the devil and every deceiving false prophet. It is there on the Cross that JESUS conquered eternal death by crucifying there with Him all your sins. There they died, and in His tomb, they were buried with Him. When JESUS arose on that first Easter morning, there they remained with the napkin and burial shroud, lying dead in the grave.

Brothers and sisters of CHRIST, truly the Cross of JESUS is the Tree of Life, the Good Tree that has born for all the world the only Fruit which can rightly be called Good. For it bore the very Body and Blood of our LORD JESUS CHRIST for your salvation. Here today you are

given to partake of those Fruits in the bread and wine, the Body and Blood, of CHRIST's Holy Supper. JESUS is your true Prophet and the fulfillment of all true prophecy. By His Fruits, you will know Him because it is by His Fruits, that He delivers you from all your sins.

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

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