

SERMON FOR TRINITY VIII – JULY 25, 2021 – MATTHEW 7:15-23

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.” Thus far our text.

As Christians, we are called to discriminate! I know that this sounds like an inflammatory thing to say, given the current cultural climate that we live in. The term “discrimination” has taken on a connotation in connection with race relations, or ethnic relations. We are bombarded from the media outlets claiming that one institution or another is “discriminating” against a certain group of people. Some of you folks probably remember the enforced racial discrimination in the southern United States in the earlier part of the last century, when “separate but equal” accommodations were considered the norm. But, this isn’t the type of discrimination that our text for today is talking about. Rather than discrimination being a bad thing, like it is considered in secular society, in the case of the church it is essential. We are given the knowledge and the guidance by God to determine which doctrines are true and should be followed, and

which are false and should be avoided. Specifically, this comes to the forefront when evaluating presentations of the Gospel message. We are to flee from false teachers, and cling to true teachers. Discrimination is nothing more, and nothing less, than evaluating a body of knowledge based on a given standard. In the church, the standard that we are to use is the Bible. We must make sure that whatever we are listening to or reading is in accord with the Scriptures, lest we run the risk of being persuaded to believe in a “different Gospel.” Things aren’t all that different now than in the time that Jesus was speaking to the disciples. There are lots of false prophets beating around in the bushes, and seeking to mislead us into great shame and vice. However, Jesus promises that He will provide us with the guidance we need, through the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Given the “post-modern” mindset that is against the existence of objective truth, we must reassert the need for an absolute standard, the Word of God, which is not open to criticism or debunking. Jesus is quite clear that those who continue to be false teachers will be condemned, while those who are true teachers will be strengthened. The same goes for their followers, eventually – those who believe the truth will be saved, and those who believe falsity will be destroyed. There is a clear division here between right and wrong, one which we should delve into a little bit more right now.

There are many false teachings out there. In fact, there are so many that it would take more time to describe all of them than anyone would be willing to sit here and listen to! But, I will highlight just a few of the more dangerous ones. Throughout the world, many people have denied the Christian Gospel, and have rather put their faith in false gods which cannot save. It is going right back to that original sin of man, in which we trust our own intellect and way of determining truth more than God. One of the most

brazen attempts to detract from the absolute truth of the Scriptures is the Mormon religion, otherwise known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. They assert that when we die, we will have our own planets, and that we will become the deity on that little piece of real estate! This sounds to me like “wanting to be like God”, doesn’t it? That is the same error that Adam and Eve fell into in the Garden of Eden. How do they back this up? They say that there is “another revelation” of Scripture, which doesn’t agree with or reinforce the Bible. We are warned to flee from anyone who preaches a Gospel that is different from or is at odds with that which is in the Bible. God has given us by inspiration all that we need to know about Himself.

We could go right on down the line through the list of non-Christian religions – Buddhists, Muslims, and all the rest. These are all attempts to subvert the truth of God’s Word, and substitute lies in its place. Ultimately, what is at work here is trying to find some way to redeem mankind by man’s own power and strength. It is a refusal to believe that man can really be that bad, brought out to its logical conclusion. That is why it is so crucial to keep our doctrine straight, so that we don’t fall into these grave errors ourselves.

An important point to remember in all of this is that I’m not saying that all members of these religions are evil people, or that they all intentionally try to deceive Christians. Many people caught up in religions that they know little about, and are just “along for the ride”. However, that doesn’t decrease the urgency that is real – if they don’t hear the Good News of Christ, and if they don’t ultimately repent of their sins, they will be sent to hell. They will be included in those who are thrown into the fire in Jesus’ illustration. His description is very graphic, and is very absolute in its scope.

Even within Christian circles, there are many false teachings that seek to drive us away from complete and utter, child-like, trust in Christ as our Redeemer. Yes, I know it's a radical statement, but there are many false teachings within Christendom! One of the most dangerous teachings within the Christian church is so-called "decision theology", where we are purported to have the ability to "decide to follow Jesus." On the surface, this seems benign enough, since Jesus is still spoken of as Lord and Savior, which is the truth. However, what can develop is a trust in our own decision over and above the objective actions of Christ on the cross of Calvary, to ultimately be the primary actor in our salvation. We need to strive to keep the Word of God pure in our midst, and not fall into errors that would mislead us. We pray that the Holy Spirit would do this work among us, just as He has promised in the Scriptures to do.

Another false teaching that is rampant among Christians is a denial of the Real Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Ultimately, the reason for this denial is that it "doesn't make sense" that Jesus can be in so many places at once, or "we can't see the body and blood there, or test for its presence empirically, so it can't be true." It is, once again, a sinful trust in our own reason and senses rather than in the truth of God's Word, in the Scriptures. The clear reading of the Word of God states that Jesus' words are, "This IS My body; this IS My blood." It doesn't get any simpler than that. But, boy how we sinful men try to make it complicated! This doesn't mean that those who hold to these false beliefs aren't Christians, because they do believe that Christ is the Savior of the world. However, the people who believe these false doctrines are opening themselves up to the misleading of false prophets, which can ultimately endanger their faith. In short, they are putting themselves into situations in which they can be misled quite easily.

So, what are we to do? Is there any hope that we will be able to determine when what we are hearing or reading is true or false? Jesus promises that “by their fruits we will know them.” If something seems to not agree with the Scriptures, then often that is exactly the case! The first step toward knowing whether or not a teaching is true or false is that we know what is taught correctly in the Bible in the first place. Regular study and immersion in the Word is not only a command of God, but is also useful and beneficial to us in our daily lives when we are surrounded by an anti-Christian culture. We read trusted, doctrinally sound sources, and don’t expose ourselves to writings and teachings by those we know to be false or misled. Even then, though, we need to keep one thing in mind when studying interpretations of God’s Word. Does it serve to glorify God’s number one goal among us His children? Does it exalt Christ and Him crucified? If the answer is Yes, then we are probably dealing with a true teaching. If the answer is No, then upon further investigation, we will probably find that we are dealing with false teaching.

The overarching comfort that we have from the Scriptures is that God doesn’t leave us alone to figure these things out. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts – He guides us into the truth, and gives us that “gut feeling” to know when something just doesn’t seem right! In addition, He gives us preachers and teachers to guide us into the truth. After all, pastors are the chief teachers within the congregation – it’s one of the main duties that we are given in our call documents. We are the ones that are called to be the spiritual fathers within the congregation, and are in charge of delivering the true fruit of God’s Word. At the seminary, where pastors are trained in such things, they used to refer to this as our “theological radar”, which only grows stronger as we become more

and more knowledgeable about the things of God. It is God's will that we not stray from His Word and will, and He works overtime in our hearts to cause this to happen. If we disobey God, and stray to the side of His commands, it is totally and completely our fault, and not His. However, if we are kept steadfast in the One True faith, it is solely by His grace.

We keep on drawing strength from the places where Christ has promised to be present – His Word and Sacraments. Baptism is where faith in Christ as the Redeemer of the world was implanted into our hearts, and we were washed of our sins by Him. The Word of God is where our faith is strengthened, and we learn ever more about the things of God and what He would have us do in life. The Sacrament of the Altar nourishes our faith, and gives us the forgiveness of our sins by the reception of the body and blood of Christ. That's why we are dismissed from the Table with a prayer that God would keep us steadfast in the One, True faith, unto life everlasting – that's what happens with the Sacrament. If we are directed to look other than to His Means of Grace for the strengthening of our faith, we should immediately be cautious. There is nothing in our "inner selves" that is worth knowing – we are completely poor and miserable sinners, helpless except for the alien work of Christ in our midst. There are no other books yet to be written by God's inspiration – He has told us all that we need to know in the Holy Scriptures. If we read an explanation of the Bible, such as Luther's Small Catechism or the other works in the Book of Concord, the premise and point of all such writing must be to amplify and explain the Word of God, not to add and subtract from it.

As Lutheran Christians, we encourage each other to read the Scriptures, listen to the reading of the Word of God, and immerse ourselves in the things of God. That is

God's will for our lives – that we draw strength from Him, and not from anywhere else. When we receive the gifts of God here at Holy Cross, we are receiving them from the hand of God Himself, through human hands and human lips. God uses each and every one of us as His ambassadors to a world that doesn't know Him, and that actively works against Him. The points to remember in all of this are two-fold – that there is an objective truth, centered in the life, death and resurrection of Christ; and that God works within us every day to keep us steadfast in that One, True faith, unto life everlasting. This is Law and Gospel at its very best – God commands us to worship Him alone, and serve only Him. However, He doesn't leave us high and dry to fulfill this law, which we cannot do on our own. He provides the guidance to know what His will is, and how to do it every day of our lives. In this case, when dealing with the things of God, discrimination is not a bad thing. It is not that we are being overly judgmental, or relying on preconceived notions to determine present events, such as the term has come to mean in our present society. Rather, discrimination in our text concerns determining whether a body of knowledge, either written or oral, is consistent with what is true. The norm that determines this objective truth is the Word of God, and the doctrine of Christ as the Savior of the world. We compare all things in the church to this objective truth, despite what the world around us says the source of truth and knowledge is. We obey God rather than men. We trust God rather than ourselves. We pray the Holy Spirit would work this in our hearts every day. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.