

08/02/20

Eighth Sunday after Holy Trinity

Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets!”

Matthew 7: 15-21

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles?

Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

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.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Savior’s warning in our Gospel-text against false prophets—against preachers and teachers who distort the Gospel and preach their own ideas—should be a reminder to us of a singular gift which has been granted to us who call ourselves “Lutherans.” Of all the great Reformer’s massive literary output, without doubt his most influential work remains what Luther simply called “the Catechism”—by which he meant both his Small Catechism for children and his Large Catechism meant for adults and for the education of pastors. Ever since it was first published in 1528, Luther’s Small Catechism has been used to instruct young people in the Gospel and to prepare them to receive the Sacrament of the Altar. For almost five hundred years, it has given Lutherans a basic outline of the central mysteries of Scripture—Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement. For almost five hundred years, it has provided to Lutherans a solid basis for a life of faith, a life of sacramental worship and prayer, and a life of God-pleasing good works. With its easily-memorized “question-and-answer” format and its concise but profound presentations on each topic, Luther’s Small Catechism remains the single best compendium of Scriptural truth in the entire history of the Christian Church.

And every year, for those like us who follow the ancient one-year cycle of appointed readings for the liturgical year, Jesus’ words in the Gospel for this eighth Sunday after Trinity should prompt us to give heartfelt thanks for this unique blessing—this priceless instrument for equipping us to

carry in our hearts and minds the essential truths of Scripture. Our Savior's warning against false prophets and the danger they pose to our very souls is a reminder to us that we—who have been blessed with this extraordinary summary of Scriptural essentials—should want to keep it fresh in our hearts and minds.

I

“Beware of false prophets,” Jesus says. Our Old Testament reading from the book of Jeremiah shows to us that the problem of lying preachers and self-serving teachers who proclaim their own ideas instead of God's truth is not new. Jeremiah had to endure the heart-break of having his own preaching rejected and his warnings go unheeded because the people listened instead to those who told them what they wanted to hear, or what would curry the favor of the wicked kings then ruling Judah, or what would be of financial benefit to those lying preachers themselves. And such false prophets have also plagued the Church of Christ from her very inception. St. Paul had to warn against those who preached that we must keep the ceremonial Law of Moses and that we must trust in our own works in order to earn our salvation. St. John had to write against those who denied the incarnation of the Son of God. And in his second epistle, also St. Peter had to warn against those who bring into the church what he calls “destructive heresies” and who “exploit (their hearers) with deceptive words.”

The Christian Creed is composed of mysteries that must be accepted in humble faith. And from the earliest centuries of the Church's history, she has had to contend with false prophets who have wanted to twist and bend those mysteries in order to fit them to human reason or to human experience. The Trinity; the incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of the holy Virgin; the sin-atonement significance of Christ's death as the basis of our salvation; His Easter-triumph over death which assures us of our own resurrection; the truth that our salvation is a pure gift of God's grace which comes to us through faith alone; the truth that our Lord's forgiveness and life are poured out upon us in the waters of baptism; the truth that He bestows and seals to us His pardon in the holy meal of His body and His blood—all of these elements of the saving Gospel have at various times been denied or distorted by false prophets who claim to speak God's word but who instead substitute their own ideas. And our Savior's warning in our text remains timely, because all of these truths are still under attack today.

II

“Beware of false prophets,” Jesus says. In our day, we need to face up to the fact that, with many people, Jesus' warning here is not at all popular.

Today, when religious truth is considered relative and it is thought that what really matters is not the content of one's faith but rather how sincerely one believes, to insist on doctrinal purity sounds to many like nothing but haughty, intellectual pride. It is spiritual arrogance, we are told, to say that a certain teaching is the truth of the Gospel and what contradicts it is soul-destroying falsehood. According to the alluring siren-song of those who stress external unity at all cost, it smacks of intolerance and parochial pride to use the term "false prophets" for those with whom we do not agree. It is, they tell us, sinful judging to say that under their sheep's clothing they are "ravenous wolves."

Our text provides to us a different perspective. It is our Savior Himself who warns us against lying prophets—He whose love is so deep and powerful that it moved Him to offer Himself in our stead, to die on the cross as our Substitute, to shed His blood to wash away our sin. It is Jesus Himself who tells us that false and lying preachers and teachers are "ravenous wolves." That is not our personal opinion of them as people. It is our Savior's own verdict on what they preach.

Jesus promises, "The one who believes and is baptized shall be saved." It makes a difference, therefore, if one preaches that we must add to His saving work and put our trust not in Him but in what we do. "If you continue in My Word," Jesus says, "then you are My disciples indeed." It makes a difference, therefore, if someone instead insists that we should listen to that person's dreams or his inner visions or her mystically-acquired insights. "This is My body given for you," says our Lord, "this is My blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." It makes a difference, therefore, when the preacher denies what Jesus says and bids us look elsewhere for assurance of our Savior's pardon.

The Gospel is not made up of hundreds of separate doctrines. It is, as Luther says, like a single, united ring of gold, and to break that ring in any part is to break the ring in its entirety. The truths of our Creed are God's own truths. Our God is three Persons in One divine essence; Christ Jesus is both true God and true Man; He was crucified for our sins and rose again on the third day that we, too, may live. It is Jesus Himself who warns us against those who distort this Gospel-message. It is our incarnate Lord Himself who condemns false prophets as soul-destroying wolves.

III

"You will know them by their fruits," Jesus says. Figs are picked from fig-trees, thorn-bushes produce thorns, thistles come from thistle-plants, and the fruits of false prophets are the lies which they

substitute for the saving truth of the Word. “You will know them by their fruits,” says our Lord. And thus Jesus Himself lays upon you and me the responsibility of knowing the good fruit from the bad.

To know the Gospel is not the same thing as to be able to memorize many passages from Scripture and recite them with little regard for their context or for the central truths which unite all of Holy Writ. And every bookstore has shelves filled with the writings of those who say they have discovered this spiritual gimmick or that psychological trick which supposedly gives them special insight—but what they share with us without fail turns out to be one more piece of pure law, one more thing we must do if we really want to be holy. Such quackery, too, is not the same thing as knowing the Gospel.

To know the good fruit—to know the saving Gospel and the really central truths of Scripture—is really to know the summaries of those truths that are given to us in the Creed. It is not meaningless pride or chest-thumping parochialism for us to realize that we who bear Luther’s name have been given a special blessing. We have a precious heritage of hymns which are filled with Trinity and Incarnation and Atonement. To the legacy which we have inherited belong home-devotions in which parents read Bible Stories or one of the Gospels to their children. And we have Luther’s Catechism, with its brief but profound summaries of all that we need for a life of faith and sacramental worship and prayer and works of love. The Lutheran Church is strong with God’s strength—and it grows with the help of the Holy Spirit—wherever and whenever its members make their rich heritage a part of their daily lives.

May the Holy Spirit grant that to us here at Old Zion, for Jesus’ sake.
Amen.