

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

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity (2021)

A Healthy Tree Bears Good Fruit

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“A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:18–20, ESV)

Professor of exegetical theology Jeffery Gibbs begins his commentary on the Gospel Reading for today by summarizing our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. Therein, echoing Luther, he writes, “The Sermon on the Mount concludes on a sobering, and yet entirely appropriate tone. The reign of heaven has entered the world in Jesus; he is in the process of enacting the Father’s saving righteousness for all ... yet God’s reign is coming in hidden ways, in an unexpected fashion. Jesus will go to the cross, and his disciples will have a cross to carry too. Jesus will uniquely drink the cup, but He will also give a cup of suffering to those who follow Him.” Thus, the time we live in today is both a time of triumphant salvation and a time of struggle and danger. Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount leads us into the world with our eyes wide open to the challenges and dangers we face as followers of His, and this is why our Lord ends His Sermon on the Mount with a note of warning concerning our present situation in light of the Last Day.

Bringing His sermon to an end, our Lord reminds His disciples, and thus us, to, ***“Enter by the narrow gate.” (Matthew 7:13, ESV)*** The ***“narrow gate”*** is that gate which stands at the end of the narrow path which leads to heaven. That is, all who will be standing on the right-hand side of Jesus on the Last Day will only get there by walking through this life on a narrow and difficult path, a path on which few pilgrims are found, the path that leads to the ***“narrow gate”*** of heaven. Moreover, this is a path on which one cannot travel by their own efforts. No, it is a path upon which Jesus must place you as He calls you through the Gospel. It is a path upon which one walks by repentance and a strong and steadfast faith that Jesus is who He claims to be, the Son of the Living God; the One who has saved sinners from their sins. Yet, all too often travelers show themselves to be people of “little faith.” Some who begin the walk, will stray off the path due to the many tribulations and distractions of the world. Therefore, to remain on the path one must be continually strengthened by our Lord’s forgiveness, encouraged by the truth that our Lord Jesus is more than willing to forgive you when you wander. Moreover, He is willing because He has walked this path before you as the Author and Perfecter of your faith.

Led to walk upon the narrow path by Jesus, a disciple finds that it is not only difficult but a dangerous path to walk. At every turn the enemies of the Gospel are looking to attack you, knocking you off the narrow path and onto the broad highway of worldly living. Jesus reminds you, ***For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” (Matt. 7:13, ESV)*** But the Gospel, Baptism, the nourishing food of Christ’s body and blood in Holy Communion, and Absolutions, energize, strengthen, and embolden the disciple to continue walking on the narrow path, trusting that on the Last Day they will pass through the ***“narrow gate”*** into everlasting life.

Scripture shows us the many reasons the narrow road to eternal life contains so few pedestrians, but chief among these reasons are false prophets who seek to lead the people of God

astray, leading them onto the broad path of worldly living and destruction, through false teaching.

Our Lord describes these false prophets as those who wear, ***“sheep’s clothing.”*** Oh, not their actual clothes mind you, for they come dressed in many and various styles, but outwardly they appear as sincere, helpful ambassadors of Christ, but inwardly they are ***“ravenous wolves”*** (***Matthew 7:15, ESV***) who think only of their self-interest. False prophets brazenly take it upon themselves to seek the ministerial office. But it is God who calls men into the office of the Holy Ministry (AC XIV) through the voice of His Church. Therefore, those who assume this mantle of their own authority are nothing more than self-aggrandizing, self-promoting hucksters who, rather than declare the Word of God faithfully, lie and prophesy deceit from their hearts, leading God’s people to take pride in their human strengths rather than the strength of the Holy Spirit, leading them to believe that God will bless them by their efforts, their works, and their contributions. Teaching men to trust in their will rather than the will of God, these false prophets make idols of men. To these, God has spoken through the voice of Jeremiah, saying, ***“I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied . . . Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, ‘declares the LORD.’ Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD.”*** (***Jeremiah 23:21, 30–32, ESV***) Jesus equates prophets such as these to ***“diseased trees”*** who bear nothing but ***“bad fruit.”***

“Bad fruit” is not healthy, rather than give you strength and energy, it will, make you sick. Lies presented as Gospel are also not healthy. They will not contribute to your spiritual health but only make you spiritually sick and weak. Yet so many today fall for false teaching just as did Adam and Eve in the Garden. The tempter comes in all shapes, sizes, and forms, but none so insidious, or so crafty as the disguise of a preacher of the Gospel. St. Paul confronted such preaching in his letter to the Galatians, saying to the members of the Galatian churches, ***“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”*** (***Galatians 1:6–9, ESV***)

We know from reading his letter the problem in Galatia was that Judaizers were coming into the churches teaching that if one wanted to be a true Christian and ensure their eternity in heaven, they had to be circumcised. They had to conform to the old Torah, the OT law. But St. Paul says to the Galatians, ***“Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”*** (***Galatians 5:2–4, ESV***)

Many modern false prophets use this theme in their preaching. If you are to be saved, if you are to be blessed by God, if you are to be in a right relationship with Christ, you must do or you must ignore. The prophets of doing peach, you must make your decision, you must contribute, you must do works, you must speak in strange tongues, you must live lives of pietistic formalism, lives of personal religious experience which isolates one from the world. For those who preach ignoring, they preach that there is no sin. All things are permissible. God is a God of love; He would never condemn a soul to something as awful as hell. So live anyway you want, consider

all religions to be equal, believe that all paths lead to heaven. Prosperity preaching, pietistic preaching, decision theology, charismatic preaching, and so many other kinds of false teaching abound. But the true quality of a prophet's teaching is the extent to which it conforms to the words of Jesus Himself, to the Gospel, and to the truth of the Crucified Christ. This will reveal whether that prophet is true or false, whether his words are from God or from Satan. And it is against listening to such false prophets that Jesus warns His followers.

The followers of Christ are to be the judges of prophets, of pastors. They are to judge them by what they preach and teach. Is their preaching and teaching in line with the Word of God, in line with the Word of the Gospel? But you ask, how am I to know? There is one certain way you can be assured of the truthfulness of the prophet's words, compare them to Holy Scripture. Be a Berean.

We're reminded that when St. Paul was in Greece on his way to Athens, he stopped in a city named Berea and attended the synagogue. There, St. Paul proclaimed the Gospel. The Bereans liked what St. Paul had to say, but to ensure that he was speaking the truth, these Bereans compared Paul's words against Scripture. This is how you can tell if what you are hearing preached from the pulpit is true or false. Checkout the pastor's words against holy Scripture. Everyone who calls themselves a Christian should be a Berean.

To this point, St. Paul, on his final trip to Jerusalem, stops near Ephesus and calls for the elders of that church to come to him so they may be together for one last time. As he meets with them, he says, ***“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.”*** (Acts 20:28–31, ESV) Here, through the words of St. Paul, God instructs His church to hold fast to everything He has taught. So, too, Jesus, at His ascension says the same, saying, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*** (Matthew 28:19–20, ESV) Too often our Lord's words to *teach all I have commanded* are ignored by men and thus, God's Church is corrupted with the words of men. Again, our Lord Jesus warns us against listening to and following those who are false teachers, saying of them and their listeners, ***“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*** (Mark 7:6–7, ESV)

Oh that such false prophets would be muted, that people would be more like Bereans. If this were so, people would not honor Christ just with their lips, but with their hearts. Their worship would not be in vain. It would not honor the doctrine and commandments of men, but the doctrine and commandments of God.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession teaches, ***“It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.”*** Adhering to this confession, the church seeks to assist our Lord's disciples those who carry a cross, those who drink of the cup of suffering, and those who live today in triumphant salvation yet in a time of struggle and danger, to remain faithful to Christ, to remain travelers on the narrow path, by cleaving solely to God's Means of Grace, His Gospel and His Sacraments in through the preaching and teaching of faithful shepherds.

Thus, to protect the members from ***“ravenous wolves,”*** we believe, teach, and confess that all who should receive the call from the congregation to preach are only those who have been thoroughly and properly trained in the Word of God and the Doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Thus, guarding against false prophets, against ***“diseased trees”*** against those who distribute ***“bad fruit,”*** while growing ***“healthy trees”*** who produce ***“good fruit,”*** fruit which will feed God’s people with His Word and His Sacraments; food which will proclaim the grace of God in Christ Jesus, food which for the sake of our Lord’s Atoning Sacrifice on the Altar of the Cross, will announce forgiveness to the wayward sinner, food which will strengthen the traveler as they walk along the narrow path of which Jesus speaks, food which will help them remain faithful to the Lord and His Word so they will never hear Him say, when they enter the ***“narrow gate,”*** ***“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”*** (*Matthew 7:23, ESV*) Seek those pastors who are indeed ***“healthy trees”*** and who produce only ***“good fruit,”*** the saving Word of the Gospel. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.