

## NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

*Luke 16:19-31*

### **They Have Moses and the Prophets**

If only. If only God seemed more real to me, if He gave me a vision or worked a miracle. If only. If only they found the ark, then I would be convinced. If only. If only I could come up with a more persuasive argument, I think she would believe. If only. If only we had worship that worked, more people would want to come, because it would be fun. If only. If only Pastor didn't preach so much about things people don't want to hear, we would grow. If only. If only we didn't talk about the roles of men and women or loosened up on our fellowship principles, more people would be open to our message. If only. If only all Christian churches could set aside their differences and stop fighting over doctrine, the world would come to faith. If only.

*"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."* Churches that have forfeited the truth and compromised for false unity have not grown, but shrunk. Churches that have tried to make worship work by downplaying Word and Sacrament have not brought more to Christ, but rather brought more to concerts and pep talks. Churches that have tried to make God reasonable to the world have not brought more to faith, but rather, because a crucified God is offensive to reason, have crafted a new Moses who teaches a false concept of love. Christians that have sacrificed what they have deemed non-essential doctrines on the altar of growth have inevitably continued to sacrifice teachings on that altar until little was left. All these churches have faltered because they gave up the one thing that creates, strengthens, and preserves faith: the Word.

Have we at times made God into the pathetic teenager who desperate tries to woo the most sought after girl in town? Have we expected God to perform great and marvelous deeds to convince us He is who He says? Have we been determined to make the church prove to us that we should come? Have we demanded the right service, the right pastor, the right atmosphere, and the right schedule. When we didn't like the externals of one church, have we simply considered shopping for a new one, whether or not Moses and the Prophets spoke as clearly there? Have we wanted to be entertained in God's house, not instructed? Have we sought kitsch and flattery, not law and gospel? Have we yearned for a preacher who persuades, not proclaims. Have we looked for a service that is created, tested, focused, and marketed to and for us, not a service that proclaims and distributes Christ to and for us? Have we coveted growth, even at the expense of faithfulness. Have we thought, in different words, but with the same basic reasoning, "If someone goes to them from the dead," that is, if something more spectacular than Word and Sacrament happens, "they will repent." Have we considered ourselves our others sophisticated for such coarse, simple, and unimpressive things as water, bread and wine, and an old book?

St. Paul addresses such thought in the opening chapters of Corinthians: *"For the wisdom of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:18). People who reject God and His means are not too wise for Word and Sacrament, but instead, they are too foolish for it and no method of conveying the truth of the Gospel to them will be acceptable to their arrogant and misguided reason. In fact, rather than caving in and trying to justify the ways of God to men, St. Paul declares, *"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified...that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God"* (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

My friends, the Gospel is not sold, it is declared. The Gospel is not marketed, it is preached. The faithful pastor does not persuade, he proclaims. What God has said is what God

has said and what God has said is what creates faith in what God has said. Nothing can make what God has said more or less what God has said. It is and remains what God has said. Baptism is Baptism because Christ instituted it. The Lord's Supper is Christ's Body and Blood because it's the Lord's Supper, and that what He says it is. The Church cannot make these things more powerful. The Church cannot make them more effective, because their effectiveness is from God, not man. And remember, effective does not always mean we see the result we want. Yes, when we preach the Gospel faithfully, we may see great growth. We may see hardened sinners, angry at God, melt before His grace and believe. But we may also see great loss, as the cross of Christ and His Word offends men and women today as it did when He walked the earth Himself. God is not more active in the growth than in the loss. Rather, in either case, the Gospel is doing something. In one case, it is the very power of God for the salvation of those who believe. In the other case, it is a stumbling block and foolishness to harden in unbelief. It is not our duty to decide what will grow. We are simply called to scatter the seed.

Riches and status are good and beneficial, but they do not save. Powerful emotional experiences can be helpful, but they do not save. Miracles are amazing, but they do not save. Well-crafted and well-delivered sermons are moving, but unless they contain and proclaim Christ, they do not save. Inspiring and rousing ceremonies can be useful for conveying a point, but unless these ceremonies are instituted by Christ and bear His promise, they do not save. Intelligent and convincing arguments in defense of the faith have their place, and do well to encourage those whose faith is attacked at college or in the workplace, but these arguments do not save. Moses and the Prophets save. God's Word saves. It saves because it proclaims and presents the Gospel, which creates, strengthens, and preserves faith in Christ.

Is your faith wavering? Do not look to the latest Christian music, which is often not Christian at all. Do not look to subjective experiences and feelings, which can be misinterpreted and can change. Do not look to contrived worship that may well be powerful with all kinds of psychological methods and the results of the latest marketing research, but not with the power of God. Do not look to reason to prove your faith, because faith is not faith if it is empirically provable here and now. Rather, look to where Christ has promised faith is worked and strengthened. Look to the Means of Grace,

You have Moses and the Prophets, and that is by no means a disappointment. You have Moses and the Prophets, and that is by no means insufficient. How do I know? Because while the rich man was tormented in hell, Lazarus reclined in heaven. The name Lazarus means "one helped by God." Lazarus had nothing to offer God. He was sick, poor, unsophisticated and uneducated. He was a pain to human eyes. All he had in this world was Moses and the Prophets, but that was enough. While the rich man made his own heaven on this earth, Lazarus looked to a heaven to come. He suffered in this life and now will never suffer again. He had the promise. He believed it. He was saved. He had no reason to believe. Everything around him said he was cursed and hated by God. He had not proof He would be saved. Nothing had gone his way so far. He had no great experience or argument to which to cling. He only had the promise. The promise was enough. You have Moses and the Prophets. You have the promise. You have Christ in Word and Sacrament. You are saved. Believe it. Never let it go. Never wish it were more, because it is all that matters, and it is more than enough. Amen.