

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Ephesians 2:20

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief Cornerstone.

This Sunday has historically been called "Orthodoxy Sunday." Orthodoxy is a word that means "right praise." We rightly praise God, and offer Him the highest praise, when we faithfully recall and proclaim His mighty works and words revealed in Christ and throughout the Scriptures. Therefore, orthodox is a term used to describe someone who properly teaches the Christian faith. An orthodox Lutheran is one who faithfully confesses the Scriptures as they've been faithfully confessed in the Lutheran Confessions. Every pastor worth His title should desire to bear that title orthodox. Every congregation should desire the same.

In our first lesson, the seminaries of Judah had turned out pastors who were anything but orthodox. The men responsible for the oversight of the souls of Judah were teaching contrary to God's revealed will and word. They had lost their bearings and sailed about aimlessly in a sea of doubt and confusion. As will always happen, when the shepherds strayed, the sheep weren't far behind. They were scattered all over the spiritual spectrum. Every idea was tossed about as on par with another, with no standard, no rule by which to judge every spiritual speculation. Such things might be fun in the pub, but are hell on the deathbed.

God tells these shepherds that they had not pastored their flock. They had not been doctors of souls. They who had been called to bring the sheep into the verdant pastures of the Lord's mercy had actually, whether intentionally or not, driven the people away from it. They may have been nice guys, great speakers, bright intellectuals, and loving individuals with a sincere concern for others, but, in failing to attend to their foremost calling of proclaiming the Word and administering God's gifts to His people, they had become the most condemnable of men, for they had not only done physical harm, like a negligent physician, but had abandoned, yes, even led their people to the gates of hell. God would have to step in, sending new shepherds, undershepherds of the chief Shepherd to come, Jesus Christ, to do Psalm 23 for the sheep of His fold.

In our Holy Gospel, we see the same problem had developed again. The rules and trifles of the men called to proclaim the Lord's mercy had driven the people away from the gracious countenance of the God who longed to bless, who had sent His Son to redeem them, so that they wandered in confusion, like blind men led by the blind. They had a big temple with large and beautiful stones, but they did not have the Cornerstone, and the foundation had been neglected.

St. Paul, in our second lesson, writes that we as Church, as the household of God, "[have] been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone." In the New Testament, Christ Jesus is often called the cornerstone, but He is only called the foundation is so far as He is the One laid down by His called spokesmen. Our Jesus is a preached Jesus, a proclaimed Jesus, a poured and promised Jesus. God did not mail everyone a Bible and tell them to lock the door and read. God put faces on the gospel as He put a face on Himself in Christ's conception. Jesus is spoken, as He spoke, taught, as He taught, preached, as He preached, given and taken in the Sacrament as the flesh and blood Savior foretold by the prophets and proclaimed by the apostles just as He told the disciples to take and eat. He is a real person made known to us in a real message.

German has a wonderful word for an idea or action not rooted in fact: *grundlos*. It is groundless. It has nothing to stand on. A picture for the word could be a dunk tank, say with a pastor on it at a church picnic, and some cruel parishioners out to get him wet. The pastor is grounded on the board. Yet, when one of the parishioners actually learns to throw, pastor is groundless. He has nothing to sit on. And what happens? He gets all wet. The foundation is torn out from under him. A Jesus who is not the Jesus proclaimed by the apostles and prophets as recorded for our ears in Holy Scripture, is groundless. He will give out from under you when the rubber hits

the road, when the devil hits his target. He is no Jesus. He is no cornerstone. He may be the popular Jesus. He may be the attractive Jesus. But He is no Jesus at all, no cornerstone.

C.F.W. Walther, one of American Lutheranism's greatest pastors and theologians, preached a famous sermon entitled, *"The Sheep Judge Their Shepherds."* The point is rather clear from the title. The sheep are accountable to God for the shepherds to whom they lend their ear. God will with deathly seriousness ask in the Judgment, "Who is your pastor?" not in a WELS name game kind of way, but as a confession of your faith. Your pastor's confession will be your own. So you'd better listen. You'd better make sure you know what he is teaching. You'd better make sure he is laying a foundation and not tearing one out, that he is lining the walls up with the cornerstone and not leaving them to crumble.

God says in our first lesson, *"I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them."* Earlier God said the unfaithful pastors had driven them away. Now He says He had driven them away as well. Why? Because the people were accountable for listening, or for not listening closely enough, to unfaithful pastors who neglected the foundation of God's house, the Church, the pillar and foundation of the truth, not as an institution, but as stewards of an unchanging message spoken by God through apostles and prophets, through pastors and teachers, as recorded in the divine Word. God said to the people in essence, "You want these shepherds with their crooked walls and crumbling floors? Fine. Have them, and have their fate. You will be crushed with them when the house they've built implodes."

St. Paul once wrote to the pastor Timothy, whom he had put through hands-on seminary training as his spiritual father of sorts, *"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."* The relationship between pastor and people, shepherd and sheep is a sacred one, an indispensable one, and a crucial one. Pastor is accountable for his people. Ezekiel records God's warning, *"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself."* This is no light task. This is the stuff that keeps me up at night and my directory marked up with notes and tears.

But God also has warning for the sheep. Jesus urges, *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."* St. Luke commends to you the example of the Bereans: *"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."* This is no light task. I pray it is the stuff that keeps you in your Bibles and Catechisms, in prayer and ever vigilant, knowing that, though I pray you always know that your pastor loves you, you cannot always know he has not erred unless you have been in the Word yourself.

St. Augustine is said to have once said something along the lines of, *I will err, but I will not be a heretic.* What he meant is that, though we all will misspeak and need to constantly grow in understanding and clarity, if we will receive correction in love and with gratitude, we will remain in the Faith and not outside of it. I will err, but I will not be a heretic. Do you know why? Because I trust you to correct me, and I promise to receive your correction, when it is in line with God's Word and in love, with gratitude. Otherwise, we both will be driven away from the mercy of the Lord, and deservedly so.

The relationship between pastor and people is a sacred one, given by God. Jesus looked on His sheep without a shepherd and His stomach churned with the same thoroughgoing compassion that held Him to the tree that our disobedience planted. May He, in that same compassion, shepherd this, His flock, through this unworthy undershepherd, granting, by His grace, that we remain on the foundation of the

apostles and the prophets, in line the chief Cornerstone! May His cross be our anchor
and His Word our light! Amen.