

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Jeremiah 23:16-29; Acts 20:17-38; Matthew 7:15-23

Can you imagine? Some will have for much of their life heard about Jesus, maybe even their whole life, infancy to birth, and yet, when their last day comes, or the Last Day comes, and they stand before the Lord God, what will they hear? You heard our Holy Gospel, didn't you? They will hear, ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven,"*** Jesus says. No, to some He will say, ***"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."***

But how? How could that happen? Let's look at a few reasons. First, many will hear the Lord speak, ***"I never knew you,"*** because they unfortunately never knew Him. They were not discriminating in matters of faith and religion, and so they never came into contact with the real Christ of the Christian Scriptures. They knew a Jesus, perhaps, but the real Jesus, crucified for our sins, raised for our justification, and seated at the right hand of God for our protection and preservation. Perhaps they heard a lot about a Jesus, but not what God has given us to be heard about Him in His Word. Yes, perhaps they read the Bible, but were never taught how to rightly do so, according to the Bible's own principles for studying it. Their preachers perhaps frequently carried around or even quoted the Bible, but not without equivocation, compromise, watering down, or reworking. The Jesus of the Bible was whittled down and reshaped, like a square made a circle, so that He in truth did not fit into God's Word. Perhaps His cross was mentioned, but sanded down, smoothed, stripped of its thorns, and thus of its blessed flowers of grace. It was therefore less than the true cross and less than a clear reminder that we too are to take up our crosses and follow Him, even through trial and suffering.

Second, many will hear the Lord speak, ***"I never knew you,"*** because they knew Him at some point, but like someone who hasn't seen another person since he or she was a child, forgot what He looks like and what His voice sounds like. An acquaintance was made, but a relationship wasn't maintained. Seldom will these people admit that to be the case. Usually they will do a great job convincing themselves that they are still Christians. Where does the Bible say you have to go to God's services, after all? Ever turned that one back on someone, though? Where does the Bible say someone can be a Christian and not go to God's services? Whenever we meet Christians in God's Word, we meet them in the habit of gathering so long as they are able. These people know Jesus, but they know Him as a memory, not as a Savior and Redeemer, because if they had known Him in such a way they would have been calling out to Him for salvation, would have been rushing to Him again and again for forgiveness, keenly aware of their inability to save themselves and of their personal sinfulness.

Third, many will hear the Lord speak, ***"I never knew you,"*** because they were introduced to the true Jesus at some point, but He was not to their liking. He made them uncomfortable. He called what they loved sin and sinful, because they loved sin and themselves above all. They were unwilling to be told they were on their way to hell if they continued in their ways and therefore never got to the point of listening to how desperately He wanted to save them, had died to save them. If a person does not feel his or her sin, he or she will not recognize his or her need for mercy, and therefore never ask for it or seek somewhere to find it. These people may often have considered themselves religious or spiritual, as those terms are tossed about in modern parlance, but their religion was not the true religion of Christ and their spirituality was not a product of the Holy Spirit. These people may have been very active in congregations, but often in congregations where those gathered had agreed not to call out each other for their sins so long as everyone else tolerated their own sins. One of the only real sins in such congregations was biblical talk about sin, although they would never put it that way or admit it.

Can you imagine the terror of that day for those who will hear Jesus speak, “*I never knew you*”? I hope you can, because only if we are terrified by such a thought will we take His Word, His warnings, His will, and His cross and our crosses seriously. The problem wasn’t a lack of preachers in Judah at Jeremiah’s time. The problem, as we see in our first lesson, is that there was a lack of biblical preachers, of faithful preachers. And that was for good reason. The people for the most part refused to support godly preachers. Their itching ears weren’t tickled by the right distinction of law and gospel, by the truthful exposition of the Sacred Scriptures. Even more, such preachers were often vilified as unsophisticated, backwards, old-fashioned, unpleasant, and stupid. They weren’t as intelligent and gifted in the eyes of many as those preachers that were intelligent and urbane enough to make God’s Word say what people wanted to hear. There were plenty of preachers in Judah. There was a lot of good preaching, in the sense of gifted speakers presenting their messages well. There just weren’t a lot of good preachers and good preaching in the sense of preachers and preaching that was in line with God’s Word, whether it was as eloquent as the others or not. In the end, eloquence is great, but it doesn’t save. In the end, frills are dandy, but frills can’t cover a sin or extend a pierced hand from heaven.

And not much has changed. Paul warned the Ephesians in our second lesson, “***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.***” There is no lack of preachers in our day either. They are on television, the radio, and the internet, in bookstores and congregations. And if you want to find one to say what you want to hear, whatever it might be, to scratch your itching ears, all you have to do is flip through the phonebook or spend a while on Google and you will find one without much effort to counsel you, not with the whole counsel of God, but with whatever it is you want to be told is fine and no big deal and someone else’s fault and square and good in God’s blurry eyes. Oh, they can make God wink nod like you wouldn’t believe, like a bobblehead. Problem is, a bobblehead hasn’t created you, hasn’t died for your sins, and a bobblehead won’t judge you on the last day. What St. Paul says to the Ephesians is what we all must want our pastor, if he is a faithful one, to strive to be able to say: “***Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.***”

What is the Bible and what do you want from it? Those questions define what our relationship with God will be, whether we will hear Him speak to us as a friend or as one who does not know Him on our last day. The Bible is God’s revelation to us and what we want from it is what He gives in it, especially Jesus. That must be our answer. His Word consists of words for us to hear, ponder, and believe, not to twist, tone down, ignore, or deny. He is the Word, come not as a chameleon or as play dough, to change colors conveniently in the different circumstances our sinful will creates or for us to shape as we see fit. He is the Word who came flesh and blood, a real person, a who-He-is, not a who-we-might-like-Him-to-be, to be recognized through God’s Word, taken hold of through faith, and followed through the obedience of that faith. So let us perceive and receive Him as He is, as He comes to us today, yes, with law, showing us our sins through His commandments, but also as Savior, pulling us from and absolving us of our sins through His Word and the Sacrament we celebrate today. There is one Jesus, brothers and sisters in Christ. May God keep us one in Him and rooted in His Word that makes Him known and present among us. Amen.