

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Jeremiah 23:16-29; Matthew 7:15-23

You are what you hear.

“What do you have in your mouth?” It seems like an odd question, and I’ve rarely asked an adult, but barely a week passes that I don’t have to ask one of my kids. “What do you have in your mouth?” Kids will put anything in their mouth: food, rocks, razorblades. And some things pass, having done no harm, but also having done no good. But other things do cause harm. Just ask an ER nurse. “What do you have in your mouth?” It’s an important question, sometimes a life saving one. The Lord asks His children a similar question today: “What do you have in your ear?” He warns those preaching, “Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully.” He warns those listening, “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.”

I as your shepherd am accountable to God for my mouth. Have I spoken His Word or my own thoughts and dreams? Have I preached to win you for Christ or for myself or my parish? And when I stand before Him I have every reason to expect Him to ask me, and I’d better have an answer. You as Christ’s sheep are accountable to God for your ears. Have you paid attention to the Word of the Lord and made sure that your shepherd has preached it? Have you searched the Scriptures in order to serve as a capable judge? Has your main concern been, not how I speak to you, but what I speak to you? And when you stand before Him you have every reason to expect Him to ask you, and you’d better have an answer.

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” Without good art, it’d be hard to recognize bad art. Without good music, it’d be hard to recognize bad music. Without good food, it’d be hard to recognize bad food. Without Tigers baseball, it’d be hard to recognize bad baseball. Without good football, it’d be hard to recognize Lions football. So also, without good Christian teaching, it’d be hard to recognize bad teaching that passes for Christian. Bad doctrine pleases the sinful nature’s palate with little effort—we’re born with a penchant for the devil’s lies—but good doctrine is an acquired taste. It took the Apostles three years to appreciate it.

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” Jesus makes an obvious point that, unfortunately, isn’t often all that obvious. False teachers don’t come with t-shirts that proclaim, “I’m a false teacher.” They look like Christians, talk like Christians, and walk like Christians, maybe even a straighter path than most. Most importantly, they also carry Bibles, quote them, and once in a while thump them. Just as a good con-man wouldn’t come to your door in a clown suit and claim to be from the water department, a false teacher knows how to act the part.

That’s why false teachers do so well. The best lie doesn’t toss out the truth; it tweaks it. That’s what Satan did in the beginning with Eve and nothing has changed. Someone can eloquently defend the idea of a six-day creation while robbing you of Christ. Someone can sing the praises of God while still not giving you His Son. Someone can even preach through the whole Bible without giving you God’s Word, because words aren’t just sounds. Words have meaning—at least good words do—and that’s why we get so insulted when someone twists our own words, and that’s why God gets so angry when someone twists His: “See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked.”

Picking and choosing God's Word is just a fancy way of rejecting it. The Bible doesn't come with your choice of sides. It doesn't come with spices and sauces. It's served straight up, and like Grandma's apple pie, you'd better eat every piece the Lord serves. If the Lord didn't want you to hear it, learn it, and live it, He wouldn't have revealed it. He does have better things to do, after all, than prattle on.

Believe it or not, it's not hard to evaluate a church or pastor. There's only one question that matters: What are they preaching and teaching? It's not merely a matter of what they officially teach on paper. Paper churches burn quickly. And it doesn't matter what they claim to believe in private. What are they preaching? What is being spoken from the pulpit and taught in the classroom, and what isn't being preached or taught? What is being heard and supported in the pews, and what isn't being heard and supported? When someone rejects part of the Word, what is that pastor or church doing in response, addressing it in love with their brother or sister, or are turning a blind eye, whether in fear or in apathy? All of that answers that simple question of what they are preaching and teaching, because empty words are just as dangerous as lies, because they lend a false sense of comfort and make a mockery of that about which they speak. Christians are called not only to go with the gospel, but to guard it, for as the gospel goes, so goes salvation.

The LORD declares, "What has straw to do with grain?" Jesus asks, "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" In other words, "What do you have in your mouth?" Straw won't do any good, thorns will do harm, and neither will provide any nourishment. Nothing ought to frighten us more than the thought of hearing our Lord one day tell us: "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Differences do matter, and one Bible in the ear is worth two in the hand or four on the shelf. You are what you hear, so hear Jesus, the real Jesus, through your pastor, through your Bibles, and through each other. But be on guard. There's wolves among them there sheep. You must know the Shepherd's voice. Fortunately, no one is ever too simple to learn the truths of Scripture as simply confessed in the Small Catechism, and no one is ever so advanced as to learn them well enough to stop. Listen to the Shepherd's voice so you can answer the ancient Serpent's question, no matter how nicely framed and by whom, "Did God really say," "Yes, He did; enough said."

When you're busy, you may not eat when you planned, and you may not eat where you planned, but you eat. Do the same with the Scriptures, because in them you have Christ, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, who heard the Father's every word and kept it, all for you. You have the Scriptures, the crib of Christ, the voice of the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep, all for you. You have the Scriptures, the footprints of Christ, left to lead you from Calvary to heaven, all for you. You have the Scriptures, Christ's last will and testament, leaving you all that by His death is your inheritance, all for you. So be all ears, and may the God who opened your ears in Baptism guard them from all error and stuff them with all truth! Amen.