

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Jeremiah 23:23-29

“Let him who has my word speak faithfully.”

A college professor from our fellowship was invited to participate on a panel to debate the truth and reliability of Scripture. At a certain point in the debate, another scholar began questioning him. “So you really believe Jonah was swallowed by a whale.” “I believe he was swallowed by a giant fish, as Scripture says.” “So you believe he was swallowed by a giant fish. How stupid! How would he survive in there?” Our professor replied, “I guess I’ll have to ask him when I get to heaven.” “What if he is not in heaven?” the antagonistic scholar inquired in mockery. “Well,” our professor said, “Then you can ask him.”

John Wesley taught a form of perfectionism, that is, he taught that a Christian could be perfect in this life. When confronted with the sins he and his followers had committed and continued to commit, he replied, “I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not...”

Recently, I had coffee with an area non-denominational pastor about misleading good Lutherans. The pastor was eager to convert me. I listened to his testimonial for an hour. He had been a Lutheran, but then experienced God, outside of the Means of Grace of course, had accepted Jesus by prayer, and now had the gift of healing and tongues. When I asked him about his statement of beliefs, he was baffled. Had I not heard his testimonial and sensed his transforming power? He kept trying to tell more stories about his experiences and the experiences of others. He ignored my constant reminder that Scripture, and not experiences and feelings, determines Christian belief. Most saddening was that in his entire testimonial the one person not mentioned was Christ. While the meeting was social, this pastor admitted he could not answer all my questions with Scripture. Instead, he insisted that I would understand if I had been transformed by the power of God. I explained that I have been transformed by God; that I was reborn in Baptism and fed forgiveness in Holy Communion. This was not the kind of transformation he meant.

The LORD says, *“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal.”*

I opened my sermon with these three stories because, as I see it, they show some of the different types of motivation for false teachers. There is arrogance, which wants to flaunt earthly wisdom above Christ. This is the false teaching of the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, which calls everything from God foolish and all that opposes Him wise. There is shame, which rejects God’s law and gospel because of what they imply. If God’s law is true, then those that sin are sinners. All sin, but no one wants to be called a sinner. Therefore, the solution is to downplay the sins we struggle with, to call them mistakes or even virtues, and to make up other works, which God has not commended, and attribute salvation to them, whether those works be monasticism, unquestioning tolerance and acceptance of other’s behavior, jihad, pilgrimage, or meditation. For the same reason the law is rejected by these false teachers, the gospel must be rejected, or at least diminished, because telling someone they need a Savior implies they have something to be saved from, which is just plain bad for self esteem. There is triumphalism, which wants nothing to do with a crucified God, but wants power. This is good old American religion. “What is this going to do for me practically. Yeah, yeah, yeah, heaven is great, but I am here now, and I want something that’s going to help me lose weight, quit smoking, get a better job, find a good wife, or get my kids to be quiet.” These false teachers are full of insights for living and 3, 6, and 10 steps to anywhere you

want to go. They have little use for law and gospel, sin and grace, transgression and forgiveness, and therefore, little use for Christ the Savior. There is existentialism, which demands fabulous experiences and transformations, powers and prophecies. These false teachers abound today. They offer worship that is advertised as uplifting, relevant, and entertaining. They have become masters of propaganda. They warm you up with some $\frac{3}{4}$ waltz tunes and a pep talk, and then, while you're on an emotional high, urge you to accept a Jesus you know nothing about. Once you've accepted him, they've reached their goal. You're now a number, a notch on their belt. Now all they have to do is feed you enough schmaltz to keep you happy and answer your questions with some pop psychology and shallow platitudes. Jesus will be mentioned once in a while, but not prominently, and rarely concerning anything important He did for you, but rather about what you need to do for Him.

Someone once said, "Clever is when you believe only half of what you hear. Brilliant is when you know which half to believe." The LORD warned Jeremiah about false prophets. The LORD warns us about the same. We are justifiably skeptical, therefore, of what we hear preached and taught. But how do we know what is right? How do we know which half to believe? Do we have our own sort of Roman idea of apostolic succession? The pope says go to the bishop, and there's the truth. Many times we get a similar idea. Go to the WELS church, and there's the truth. Will that always be the case? Is Pastor Johnston infallible because he came from a seminary in Wisconsin? I think you know better than that. I hope you know better than that, because if I have not done so already, I will speak heresy from this pulpit some day, not on purpose, but because no matter how hard I study and how carefully I word my manuscript, at some point something is just not going to come out how I meant it to or how it should. What then? Will you be able discern the truth?

"Let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? Declares the LORD. Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" As Lutherans, as Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, we rightly confess that we have a sure prophetic Word. We believe, based on careful and prayerful study, that we teach the Word as God revealed it. We confess that this is the case, not because we are so smart or holy or perfect, but because God is so gracious. Such a claim is not popular in a world that prefers Pilate to Christ. "What is truth?" the world cynically asks. "Christ is Truth," we reply. "Who is Christ," they ask, as they see so many Christs preached to them by so many churches. They have good reason to be cynical, but we also have good reason to be relentless. Sure we may be mocked, like the college professor who believed the account of Jonah, but that just means the truth is getting somewhere. People wouldn't get so upset at the truth, if it weren't striking a nerve.

As Christians, our job is not, as Milton claimed in *Paradise Lost*, "to justify the ways of God to men." No, we are simply to proclaim to men that in Christ's death and resurrection God has justified Man. What is the world's straw compared to God's wheat, the Bread of Life? What are all the spiritual gifts and powers the world can create compared to the gospel, the power of God for the salvation of all who believe? God's Word is a hammer that breaks every lie to pieces. His Word is a fire that tests all of the false prophets' claims, and reveals them for what they are: rubbish.

Do you want certainty? Do you want power? Do you want salvation? Do you want knowledge? Do you want transformation? Do you want answers? Well, do what the writer to the Hebrews told us to do today: *"fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."* Where can you find this Jesus, who *"endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,"* all for you? Find Him where He's promised to be found: in Baptism, in Holy Communion, and in the Word. That's the truth, and as St. Augustine said, "The sweetness of truth is eternal." Amen.