

Sermon Trinity 8 2021

July 25, 2021

Matthew 7:15-23

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on guarding against wolves in sheep's clothing.

As we hear the passage from our second reading in Acts, we have this glimpse into Paul's departure from the town of Ephesus. Now, as Paul makes the point in the lesson, as he was with them he taught them constantly. In fact, as he's talking, he's especially talking to the elders of that town. Interestingly, just like it appears the disciples were with Jesus three years, that's how long Paul was with the Ephesians. And so they learned. They went to seminary, so to speak. And now Paul is departing from them. And we see the love and the care for them as he does this. There are tears, there is sorrow. I'm sure you all can relate to this having had pastors that you loved serve here and then be called to other congregations. That's Paul and the Ephesian church here. But in that love, what do we see that Paul says to them?

First, he tells them, **“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.”** In other words, he says, “You all are pastors. The Holy Spirit has made you shepherds of the Church of Christ. Watch over them. Over see them.” So, Paul is encouraging these pastors as he leaves Ephesus. He's telling them, you watch over these people, because they're Christ's people. And then he says, **“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.”**

So second, he tells them that there will be these fierce wolves that will come in and not spare the flock. Of course, this we can connect to the Gospel Lesson. Even though we don't have evidence that Paul listened to much if any of Jesus' preaching in his earthly ministry, the Lord had made sure that Paul knew somehow that there was a need to watch out for wolves in sheep's clothing. As He said in the Gospel Lesson, **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”**

Now, in our day, we hear that, but often when a pastor actually calls another teacher in the church, or calls people outside of the church wolves in sheep's clothing, it grates against our sensibilities. I was reading a book on vacation that I really appreciated how it spoke about this. It said that in our culture of Christianity, we have the eleventh

commandment of “Be Nice.” Now, obviously, he’s using the phrase eleventh commandment to make a point. God didn’t give us this commandment, but we seem to assume that as Christians, we always have to be nice. As I say that, to be clear, I’m not advocating that we be jerks. Love tells us that we shouldn’t intentionally be rude or unnecessarily disrespectful. But often when someone is pointed out as being a false prophet, the finger gets pointed back at the person saying that naming them as someone who is mean and unloving.

But look at Paul. Do you think he didn’t love the Ephesians? Look at the tears he’s shedding as he’s leaving them. Look at how he’s making the point that he loved them and taught them—which that teaching of the Word is really the greatest love we can show. It’s the greatest love we can share with our children and all our neighbors. You know it’s more important that our children grow up to be Christian than well educated. To be clear, those don’t have to be opposed, but we also need to be cognizant of making that point to them. Likewise, the most loving thing we can do for our neighbors is to tell them of the God who loves them and as Paul said, “**obtained them with His own blood.**”

But I digress. The reality is that as we speak this Word and as we point out how there are those who contradict it, we are called mean. But yet that’s what Paul says to do in his love for the Ephesians. That’s what Jesus tells His disciples. Be on the lookout for these false teachers. That word there to lookout for actually is a nautical term where you talk about holding a ship in a particular direction. Hold on to your attention to the teachings out there. Watch them and discern their truthfulness. In fact, as a teacher of the Church, I am to watch out for that and correct where it’s wrong.

I may have told you this before, I can’t recall. But I remember when this hit home for me. It was on my vicarage. I was reading my Bible for my daily Bible reading, and I was reading Titus Chapter One. Now Titus Chapter One is about the qualifications of being a pastor. Paul, as a pastor, is writing to Titus, as a pastor about what that means, and encouraging Titus in his work as a pastor, and probably even, in a sense as a bishop, where he was serving. As Paul talks about this, he tells Titus that elders—and that’s not necessarily like elders as we have, but pastors—but Paul tells Titus that an elder “**must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.**”

Now that really struck me. Why? Not because as I was training to be a pastor that I realized I would need to hold firm to the Word. Of course, I would need to do that. Nor because I needed to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine. Of course, I need to do that. No, but because I would need to rebuke those who contradict it. That’s what

struck me: the rebuke of those who contradict it. The need to say, “No, that is wrong.” We don’t like that in our day, do we? You have your truth, and that’s OK. I have my truth and that’s OK, right? But that’s not what the Scripture shows us. That’s not what Jesus tells His disciples when He tells them to watch out for false prophets, for these wolves in sheep’s clothing. That’s not what Paul told the pastors in Ephesus. That’s not what Paul told Titus.

And if that’s not enough, we see it in the Old Testament Lesson too. Now, to give some context to this, when Jeremiah is speaking—or when he is prophesying, really, speaking as the mouthpiece of God—this is in the time of the kingdom of Israel when God is telling them they need to repent because they are being unfaithful, and due to that unfaithfulness He’s going to bring judgment upon them. Namely, He’s going to bring other kingdoms in that will overtake them and conquer them. But what do you see there? Jeremiah speaks this word from the Lord: **“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”** Now, I hear people somewhat regularly talk about how Christians—and I would argue this accusation is especially directed at Lutherans even by other Christians—that we talk too much about sin. In our day and place we want a “more positive message.” That sounds a lot like people want a message that says “Even if you despise God’s Word, it shall be well with you. No disaster shall come upon you.” But that’s not the message the Lord speaks. What message does He speak?

Think about what Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke. I know you’re probably thinking, “Pastor, I can’t remember whether He says something in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, let alone to know what you’re thinking of specifically in Luke.” I know. So, at the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is talking to His disciples. It’s after the resurrection, and He’s teaching them about His fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, then He tells them **“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”** What’s the message? Repentance for the forgiveness of sins! Not “it shall be well with you, No disaster shall come upon you.”

Now we hear that, and we might say, why? Why does it have to be so—how should we say it?—negative? Heavy? Well, that’s fair to ask I suppose. But let’s take a step back and consider what this deals with, Who were talking about. What is this? Who are we talking about? We’re talking about the eternal God! And we’re talking

about how our sin has offended Him and created a rift between us that apart from repentance results in an eternity in hell. That's a very serious thing. And so when we're talking about God we don't want to say false things about Him. That's what the Second Commandment that tells us not to misuse His name tells us. That's what our petition that His Name be hallowed means. It means that we would speak of Him rightly, that we would live faithfully according to His Word. It means that we would call upon Him in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, not just willy-nilly or throw around His Name as an exclamation or even a curse. So that's part of it.

The other part of it is love. The other part of it is the care of souls. Christians, there is a real danger in unrepentance. There is a real harm that will come to those who don't repent. And out of love we don't want that. When people don't hear that, that's a problem. When a teacher is telling them publicly that repentance is a non-issue or shouldn't be preached much, if at all, so that the message can be more positive, that's a false prophet. That's telling people what they want to hear. That's why we preach the commandments to their fullest demand, and why we don't shy away from describing the full consequence of falling away from them.

But we also include in that preaching of repentance, the faith that clings to Jesus. And that's what we really want people to know. We want people to know the Christ who is the second person of the Trinity, God made man in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. And we want people to know that this Christ was crucified on the cross of Calvary that people's sins would be atoned for, completely covered by His blood that they would have eternal life with this Lord who created them and loves them, this Good Shepherd Who laid down His life for the sheep. We also want them to know how He promises to be with them that they can have certainty; how He promises to meet with them in His Word, His preaching, and in the waters of baptism and how He promises to come to them in His body and blood. We want them to have that assurance even over against Churches who get it right that Jesus died for their sins and saves by faith alone but don't get that presence in Word and Sacrament right, because that promise of His presence gives assurance and comfort when that Hammer of God's Law crushes us. And we want this out of love for them. We want it that way just as Paul wanted the Ephesians protected from wolves, just as Jesus calls us to watch out for wolves in sheep's clothing. And we want this for ourselves because our Lord wants this for us out of His great love for us. His love that caused Him to die for our sins that we could be with Him forever. Amen.