

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity
Sunday, July 25, 2021
Matthew 7:15–23

Every field has experts, those who are educated and trained in that field. We expect them to know more in their area of expertise than the rest of us. We hope our doctor has a better grasp of medicine than we do. We make use of financial and legal professionals because they have a greater understanding of finances and the law. But should we leave all the knowledge in their particular field up to them? Should we not listen to their advice and examine it? Shouldn't we discern whether it is accurate and beneficial? Not all who are experts in a field are legitimate and some may simply not give sound advice.

Professional theologians and pastors are experts in doctrine. They are educated and trained in the teachings of the Bible and of Christianity. But should you leave theology and doctrine to those who make their living dealing in theology? Should you just let those who are called to preach and teach in the Church take care of doctrine? Is your interaction with doctrine reserved for Sunday morning but otherwise has no real bearing on your day-to-day life during the week?

On the contrary our Lord teaches you in this Gospel reading today that you need to know doctrine. You must not leave it up to the professional theologians. You may not be an expert in doctrine but you need to have a grasp of it.

Jesus says that we need to be aware of false prophets. While there are many sound and faithful pastors there are also false prophets among us. Those who are not in the Christian Church are easily distinguished. They teach from something other than the Bible and things other than the triune God being the only and true God. The false prophets Jesus warns us about come in sheep's clothing. They look like they belong among God's flock. But inwardly, He says, they are ravenous wolves. What they say and do often will appear good and true. So how do you know?

Jesus says you will know them by their fruits. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit. A bad tree cannot produce good fruit. You know a tree by its fruit. You will know a true prophet by the fruit he produces and a false prophet likewise by his fruit.

What is the fruit that a prophet produces? Is it the way he lives, the things he does? Certainly a pastor needs to live a moral and upstanding life. The ones God calls to preach and teach in His Church are to be examples to the flock. We know of too many teachers in the Church who live in a shameful way. A pastor who lives in open and unrepentant sin is disqualified from serving in the ministry. He must be removed from the office of serving in God's holy Church.

Establishing that pastors must live an exemplary life, the primary fruit of a prophet in God's Church is what he says. The ones God calls to preach and teach in His Church are proclaimers. They speak God's word. This is the fruit that is produced by a prophet. What everyone needs to be on the lookout for is what he says. When he is publicly preaching and teaching God's word, what is he saying? Is he being faithful to the written Word of God? Or is he speaking beyond

what God has made known in His Word, the Bible? Is he taking some parts of the Bible and saying that they do not pertain to us? Is he taking the Word of God and altering it or twisting it in some way? He may be speaking of God and Jesus and the Bible, but is he really communicating a message that is not centered in our sin and our need for salvation? Is he preaching another Gospel, that we need to do something to be saved? Is he pointing you to yourself instead God's action of sending His Son to suffer and die on the cross for the sin of the world?

This is the fruit of a false prophet. It is in what he speaks and teaches. False prophets speak in Jesus' name, they speak by His authority, and they speak of Him, but they do not speak faithfully God's message. In the Old Testament reading today the false prophets are speaking peace to God's people. Certainly God has a message of peace. This peace however comes only through Christ. It is peace in being reconciled to God. True proclamation as opposed to false proclamation is clear that we are sinners. We are deserving of eternal damnation. It is clear that we are unable to rescue ourselves from this eternal punishment from God. We must repent of our sins. We must turn from our sins. For a prophet to speak peace to God's people when they are unrepentant is to confirm them in their destruction. They will not see their sin for what it is, that it separates them from God. They will not take seriously their sin and their need for repentance even though with God it is of the utmost seriousness.

True prophets speak the word of God in its fullness. They call a spade a spade. They call sin for what it is. They call the people of God to repentance. They speak judgment where God has called them speak to judgment. The only peace they proclaim is the peace of God in Christ Jesus. They do not point people to themselves but to Christ alone.

This is not a popular message. It turns many people away. True prophets tell people what they don't want to hear. Many people are drawn to false prophets and turned off by faithful prophets. False prophets tell people what they want to hear. Jesus says in the Gospel reading that many in that day will say to Him, "Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?" Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!'"

Jesus gives a warning here to those who are called to publicly proclaim His word to be faithful. They are not under the guise of speaking of Him and in His name and in doing all kinds of good works to point people to themselves. They are to proclaim sin and grace, judgment and salvation, Law and Gospel. Those who do not He will say to them, "I never knew you. Depart from Me, you lawbreakers."

Jesus' warning to you is that you must know prophets by their fruit. You need to listen to what they say and discern whether it is true or false. You need to know doctrine. You are not an expert but God the Holy Spirit Himself is your teacher. You must not go by your own reason or your own feelings or by what society thinks. You need to read the Word of God and study the Word of God. You need to listen to those God has called to preach and teach the Word and measure it

against the written Word of God. If what is being taught goes against God's Word then it is false doctrine and it leads you to destruction.

Jesus warns you of this danger because He loves you and does not want you destroyed. If someone is in danger and unaware and you know their danger and you fail to warn them then you are leaving them to their harm. Jesus sees the danger you are in. There are wolves among you in the Church and He warns you of them. You will know them by their fruit. Listen to the ones who hold up Christ and His cross for your salvation and flee the ones who don't. Take His exhortation to you to heart, take the doctrine seriously. Your life depends on it. False doctrine kills. True doctrine gives life.

Each day live not in the false notion of peace that you are okay as you are but in the true peace that surpasses all understanding and which guards your heart and mind in Christ Jesus. He is the one who suffered for the sin of the world and lives on high forever to forgive you your sin and give you life now and forever. Amen.

SDG

Rev. Paul L. Willweber
Lutheran Service Book Lectionary: One-Year, Gospel
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, San Diego, California