

Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Trinity, 17 July 2016
Luther Memorial Chapel & University Student Center—Shorewood, WI
MATTHEW 7:15-23
The Rev. Jason D. Lane

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. The text is Mt. 7:15-20:

15] WATCH OUT FOR THE FALSE PROPHETS, WHO COME TO YOU IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING, BUT ON THE INSIDE, THEY'RE WOLVES ON THE HUNT. 16] YOU'LL RECOGNIZE THEM BY THEIR FRUIT. DO PEOPLE PICK GRAPES FROM THORNBUSHES, OR FIGS FROM THISTLES? 17] GOOD TREES BEAR GOOD FRUIT; A BAD TREE BEARS BAD FRUIT. 18] A GOOD TREE CAN'T BEAR BAD FRUIT, AND A BAD TREE CAN'T BEAR GOOD FRUIT. 19] AND EVERY TREE THAT DOESN'T BEAR GOOD FRUIT IS CHOPPED DOWN AND THROWN ON THE FIRE. 20] AND SO, YOU'LL RECOGNIZE THEM BY THEIR FRUIT.

If a prophet is someone whom God sends, who speaks on God's behalf, what is a FALSE PROPHET? He is someone whom God did not send, who says he speaks for God, but really only speaks for himself. Again, if a prophet is someone who reveals God's will and work to you, what does a FALSE PROPHET do? He is someone who does not reveal God's will and work to you. Notice it's not someone who's ignorant and doesn't know what the Lord says. It's someone who knows, but won't tell, who takes advantage of people in the name of the Lord, who says He's God's mouthpiece, but he's not *God's* mouthpiece. He's just the *world's* mouthpiece or he's the *devil's* mouthpiece or he's his *own* mouthpiece. Whatever, it's not God's words he's saying.

False prophets exist and the Lord says, "WATCH OUT for them! They'll COME TO YOU IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING, BUT INSIDE ARE WOLVES ON THE HUNT."

So what? You're supposed to watch out for everything that's preached and prayed and sung and taught, so that you don't get eaten? Well, yes. But it's not just that you get every point of doctrine right, it's that right doctrine

comes from God's own word and *only God's words can save a sinner*.

Only *God's* Law can show us our sin as black as it really is. Only *God's* Law can cut through our self-deceit, and expose our broken heart. And then, once we've *been* cut open, only *God's* Gospel can show us our *Savior* the way *He* really is. Only *God's* Gospel gives us unconditional forgiveness and, as we sing, create in us a *clean heart*, because only *God's* Gospel brings us Christ. God's words are black and white. But FALSE PROPHETS, the kind that Jesus is speaking of, tell a *different* Law, that's not so sharp, not so terrible, not so black. And FALSE PROPHETS tell a *different* Gospel, that's not so free, not so wonderful, not so impossibly bright. And they leave poor sinners lost in the grey. It's not hot or cold; it's lukewarm. And what's that good for?

That's why Christ says, WATCH OUT! because they COME TO YOU IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING. That is, they can look more Christian than Christians do. When they tell *their* version of the Law, some of them sound so much *nicer* than the real prophets. They say, "YOU'RE FINE; all's well!" *They* don't think you're so bad.

And when they tell *their* version of the Gospel, some of them sound so much *holier* than the real prophets. No cheap grace from *them*! They say, "Christ has done it for you, but what have you done for Him?" From them, it's grace only for the ones who prove worthy! But however nice or holy they seem, Jesus says, ON THE INSIDE, THEY'RE WOLVES ON THE HUNT.

They're all hungry. Because they haven't LISTENED TO GOD'S WORD for *themselves*. The Lord told Jeremiah: IF THEY HAD STOOD IN MY COUNCIL; IF THEY'D PAID ATTENTION TO MY WORDS, THEY WOULD HAVE PREACHED MY WORDS TO MY PEOPLE! But as it is, they're not crushed by the Law; they're not filled by the Gospel. As it is, they're just ravenous.

Some are so demonic that they actually *are* hungry for human souls. But most of them don't really care about human souls at all. St. Paul says they'll STAND UP AND TWIST THE TRUTH IN ORDER TO DRAW DISCIPLES AFTER THEM – they're just hungry for followers! So that

they can feel important – because they have no idea how important they are to God Almighty. Or they're hungry for self-righteousness, because they don't *have* the righteousness of Christ. Or they're hungry for earthly money, because they have no INHERITANCE WITH THE SAINTS. Or they're *hungry* to feel wise and holy and deep, because God's Law has never shattered them with the knowledge of how foolish and filthy and shallow they are, like every poor sinner in this world.

But if they look like SHEEP, how can I tell that they're WOLVES? Jesus says, V. 16] YOU'LL RECOGNIZE THEM BY THEIR FRUIT. He's *not* talking about good or bad *deeds*: He just told us how nice and holy FALSE PROPHETS can look. No, the FRUIT of a baker is what he bakes. The FRUIT of a carpenter is what he builds. And the FRUIT of a prophet is what he *says*. YOU'LL RECOGNIZE a FALSE PROPHET by his words, when they're not *God's* words. How can I *tell*? I can tell because God in His great mercy has sent out His words for the rescue of human beings, and even caused them to be miraculously caught in letters on paper; in black and white, so we can know who's speaking God's words and who's not. Beloved, learn the Scriptures that can make you wise for salvation, and we'll RECOGNIZE the WOLVES BY what comes out of their mouths.

Jesus says, V. 16-17] DO PEOPLE PICK GRAPES FROM THORNBUSHES, OR FIGS FROM THISTLES? GOOD TREES BEAR GOOD FRUIT; A BAD TREE BEARS BAD FRUIT. And on the Last Day, when every FALSE PROPHET is going to answer FOR EVERY WORD THAT CAME OUT OF HIS MOUTH, then, V. 19] Jesus says that EVERY TREE THAT didn't BEAR GOOD FRUIT really will be CHOPPED DOWN AND THROWN ON THE FIRE. If that is what's coming for them on the Last Day, do not listen to them now.

As the Lord told Jeremiah, DO NOT LISTEN to the ones who SPEAK THE DELUSIONS OF THEIR OWN MINDS, who say "PEACE" to people who despise God's Word and "NO HARM WILL COME" TO PEOPLE WHO living in a dream world. But HARM *will* come. And only *God's* words can save a sinner from the HARM that's coming.

But FALSE PROPHETS today tell sinners in denial that their only real problem is that they just don't know how much God loves them, and of

course, they *don't* know that. But their *first* problem is that they don't know that by their "sins and unrighteousness they have continually offended Him and justly deserved His punishment both now and eternally." FALSE PROPHETS today tell people, "Just do your best! God doesn't demand perfection!" But is that true? Tell me, which sin *is* it that He's going to learn to live with? No, *God's* word *does* demand perfection: either *your* perfection, which is His Law, or the perfection of Christ, offered up for you, which is His bright and shining Gospel. God says, DO NOT LISTEN TO THE PROPHETS WHO LIE IN MY NAME.

But it's not as though anybody here's really likely to join the Mormons or the Unitarians or any other cult, so how much damage can false teaching do to *us*? Look around you. The world is full of something that Christ saw coming, but His Apostles never lived to see: I mean, denominations of Christians, and I mean *Christians*, telling each other, "God says this! No, God says that!" It's *terrible* and it confuses a lost world that needs God's words straight. Where do denominations come from? They come from FALSE PROPHETS who, long ago, led Christians away from this or that word of God.

Until today, most Evangelicals will tell you, "Yes, we've all sinned, but we're not so bad that we can't decide to follow Christ *now*. God's willing! It's up to you!" But if it's up to *us*, there's no help for us. Because THERE IS NO ONE WHO SEEKS GOD. Not until God finds them.

Most Roman Catholics and most Pentecostals will tell you, "Grace saves you!" Wonderful! But then they add: "Grace saves you, provided that you love the Lord and show it! Provided you're totally devoted to Him. Provided you keep up with what He commands." But *GOD'S GOSPEL* says, "NOT THAT WE LOVED GOD, BUT THAT HE LOVED US AND SENT HIS SON AS THE ATONING *SACRIFICE* FOR OUR SINS. For GOD WAS IN CHRIST, RECONCILING THE WORLD TO HIMSELF, NOT COUNTING our SINS AGAINST us.

Look: anybody at all who looks to Christ crucified and says, O GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME, A SINNER – they're going to go HOME JUSTIFIED! But how much damage can we sustain in this life before the cross is totally hidden from our eyes? Long ago, FALSE PROPHETS –

wicked, wicked men – looked at the Water and the Word just *poured out* in Baptism and said, “No! Salvation’s not *that* free!” But if it’s not that free, we can’t afford it. And they looked at the Lord’s Supper – at sinners eating and drinking Christ their Righteousness – and they said, “No! Salvation’s not that simple!” But if it’s *not* that simple, we’ll never find it. Those FALSE PROPHETS were a long time ago, but the damage they did is still here. All Protestants in America except for some Episcopalians and Lutherans – and I mean *believing* Protestants: Evangelicals and Baptists and Pentecostals – to this day all of them still say, “Jesus doesn’t wash our sins away in Baptism. That’s just how we promise that we’ll do what He told us.” And they look at Holy Communion and they say, “Jesus isn’t really there. That’s just something to remember Him by.” It’s heartbreaking, because they turn God’s gifts into commands, and Christ’s pledge to them into their wavering commitment.

Because they’re not WOLVES IN SHEEP’S CLOTHING. No! They’re SHEEP! They’re Christ’s SHEEP, but they’ve been so injured by human words that when they hear *God’s* words: THIS IS MY BODY GIVEN FOR YOU. THIS IS MY BLOOD FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS, they really *can’t* hear their Shepherd’s voice. They really can’t believe that it’s all *true*.

Now, I know for certain that a lot of misguided Christians are *really* nice, and with daily lives that are more holy than ours. But that’s not the point. The point is that their niceness can’t rescue them, and their holiness can’t save us. Only *God’s words* can save sinful souls. And we should be honest how easily we are lured by other voices. You and I both know how easily we can listen to the world or the devil instead of to the WORD THAT HAS POWER TO SAVE OUR SOULS.

That’s why we swore when we were confirmed: “Will you remain faithful and steadfast in this teaching?” “Yes, with the help of God!” That’s why we pray every Sunday, “O Lord! Keep Your word pure among us!” It doesn’t take long before we come up with our *own* version of the Law, which is always less condemning. And then our own wretched version of the Gospel, which finds a way to rob God of His mercy.

So when the pastor stands up there, as a called and ordained servant of the

word, and announces the grace of God, I can start to believe He's talking to *them* and not to me, either because I don't need it or because God couldn't mean my sin. It's either denial of the diagnosis or rejection of the cure. When the pastor says, in the place and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ, I say, if only that were true. He says, I forgive all your sins—if only it were that simple." But it *is*! It is! God said, "WHOEVER'S SINS YOU FORGIVE – THEY'RE *FORGIVEN!*"

That's *God's* words. So where is this other stuff *from*? It's from the FALSE PROPHET inside us, that's nothing but a mouthpiece for sin and unbelief, and if we go along with the FALSE PROPHET inside us, we'll die. You know what we need? We need TO STAND IN THE COUNCIL OF THE ALMIGHTY, AND LISTEN TO *HIS* WORDS, like a FIRE and a HAMMER to SHATTER all the lies. We need *God's* Law to bring us to our knees, and *God's* Gospel to stand us up on our feet. Until, like St. Paul, I know that at my *best*, I *WANT TO DO WHAT IS GOOD, BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO IT*. But I also know that THE BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST CLEANSSES me FROM ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS. Till you can say with St. Paul, I KNOW THAT IN ME, THAT IS, IN MY SINFUL NATURE, DWELLS NO GOOD THING. But at the same time, I KNOW *WHOM* I HAVE BELIEVED, AND AM PERSUADED THAT *HE* IS ABLE TO KEEP WHAT I'VE COMMITTED UNTO HIM UNTIL THAT DAY.

Because His WORDS ARE SPIRIT AND LIFE: they're the words that do what they say, that call THINGS THAT ARE NOT AS IF THEY WERE, and that actually, thank God, will turn us into what He says we are. They're the WORDS OF *GOD* that framed the universe, and that can turn WOLVES into SHEEP, and BAD TREES INTO GOOD and then make the GOOD FRUIT GROW, until *ALL GOD'S PEOPLE ARE PROPHETS*, because they've all been crushed by the Law and saved by the Gospel. Till we all become *God's* mouthpieces, as *God* cuts us open *wide* and wider by His Law, and *God* fills and fills and fills you again with THE WORD OF GRACE THAT CAN BUILD YOU UP AND GIVE YOU AN INHERITANCE WITH THE *SAINTS* ... and that not only *can*, but *does*, and *has*, and *will*. Because *this* is the Word of the *Lord*. Amen.

THE PRAYERS

Heavenly Father, giver of all good things, remember Your family in Your great compassion, and give us grace to live in the fullness of our Baptism into Christ each day. Grant that we might die daily to sin and walk in the newness of life He has given. Grant us joyful obedience to Your holy commands through the forgiveness of our sins. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Gracious Lord, send the light of Your truth into all the earth. Raise up faithful servants of Christ to advance the Gospel both at home and in distant lands strengthening them in their love for Your Word. Look with favor upon our synod gathered in convention and upon Christ's mission to us and through us in this passing world. Use us and that by which You have prospered us to make known the light of Christ to a world sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, You command us to pray for those in authority. Remember the public servants in our land - giving them honesty and wisdom to discern what is good and pleasing to You and the courage to pursue it. Receive our thanks for Your gift of our nation with its life and liberty and keep us mindful that freedom is always Your gift, not ours by merit or right, Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Gracious Lord, You reveal that You knit us together in our mother's womb. Grant to all mother's with child and those with infant children increasing happiness in their blessings, especially Jennifer and Kate. We thank You for the birth of a son to Jonathan and Stefanie and ask that you would grant health to mother and child and the washing of rebirth to Him. Grant us respect for your gift of life from the youngest of the unborn to the oldest of the aged. Help us to have merciful eyes and helping hands for those in need. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Merciful Lord, consider this congregation assembled to receive the gifts of the risen Christ. Grant help to all who face trouble. Grant safety to those who travel especially our youth and the Sovitzky

family and the thousands travelling for the convention. According to Your merciful will grant healing both to those in our midst and those on our minds. Hear us especially for Holly and Lisa and Hannah and David and Clifford and Teresa and young Gabriel. Grant patience and trust in You in all suffering and adversity. Grant restoration of health through medical means and beyond those means as You will. Be our refuge in this transitory life and deliver us from every evil of body and soul. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Merciful Lord, give us times of refreshment and peace in the course of this busy life. Grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds that we may be open to the beauty and the goodness of Your creation and to the joyful contemplation of Him who makes us new. Lord in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Receive our thanks for all the faithful who have gone before us in Christ and are now with Him who comes to serve us. By the work of Your Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament keep us ever faithful that we also obtain the joys of life in the new heavens and the new earth. Lord in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Join our prayers and praises with those of Your faithful people of every time and place, and unite them in the ceaseless petitions of our great High Priest until He comes in power and great glory as victorious Lord of all. Through Him, with Him and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all power and glory are Yours, almighty Father, forever and ever. **Amen.**