

Eighth Sunday After Trinity

(Matt. 7:15-23)

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction: It is a joy to be with you, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ. For me, it is pure joy to be among you at long last and to serve as your Associate Pastor here in this holy house of God. What a magnificent thing it is, and the truth, dear ones, is that I have longed to be here at St. John's; I've longed to be here ever since I was called to serve here by our Lord back in April, to come alongside Pastor Wright here and proclaim the pure teaching of the Gospel to you, to bring you the blessed Sacraments, and to begin walking through all of life here together with you in this place—through whatever may come our way—be it sickness or health, sadness, or great joy. And through it all, dear ones, to embody the love of Christ for you and for your ultimate good. This has been my desire. And I must say, now that my family and I have at last arrived, you've all done such a beautiful thing in the way that you've welcomed us, in the way you've opened your arms to us and made us feel at home—just as I had every confidence that you would. And I commend you highly for this great kindness you've shown us, which is the fruit of your faith as the people of God here in this place. Glory to God! And my heartfelt thanks to all of you.

Now, given our Gospel text for today and given that this is, of course, my first homily to you, I'd like to do two basic but very important things in a bit of a roundabout way: The **first** is to make plain what all of you can and should expect from me as one of your pastors—and, for that matter, from *any* pastor who stands in this pulpit. And the **second** is to lay before you, in all humility and Christian love, what Almighty God has given you to do as *hearers*—as those who listen and conform yourselves to the Word of God given Pastor Wright and I to preach to you.

And as it is with our Lord Jesus, and as one who will speak to you in His stead and by His command, I pray that now and always, in all my preaching and teaching, in all my toil and labor for your sake, and in everything I do, that you will know more fully and deeply the precious treasure that God our Father has laid up for every one of you—and that is the love God has for you in His only-begotten Son, Jesus, our great God and Savior—and that, by believing in Him, you would have life in His name.

For our Lord Jesus Himself is very much concerned with bringing you into this life of communion with the Father that He comes to give, which is why our Gospel text for today sounds the way it does. It comes just after Jesus says this during the Sermon on the Mount: that “the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to *destruction*, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to *life*, and those who find it are few.” Truly, the way that leads to the blessedness of eternal life with God is difficult and full of danger. And so our Lord focuses His attention on one of the chief dangers on this path—something which will surely lead you away from the path that leads to life—false prophets—or, more literally, pseudo-prophets.

Now, generally we can say there are two things that make a false prophet what he is, and these things are linked together: the **first** is when people take it upon themselves to preach and teach publicly in God’s name without any legitimate call from God to do so—people who’ve been given no office, no genuine authority to speak on our Lord’s behalf, and yet there they go in their presumption speaking what God has not given them permission to speak. And even if they may say true things, even if they may preach like an angel and conduct themselves in all innocence and godliness as far as we can tell, it makes no difference, dear ones. If they haven’t

been called by God to do these things, neither they nor their hearers should expect the blessing of God no matter how noble their cause may seem.

You all know, for example, that in and of itself, taking out a loan isn't necessarily sinful in the sight of God. In fact, in the right circumstances, it may well be good and wise—maybe to buy a better home for your family, or a more dependable car to get to work. But it's an entirely different thing altogether when someone takes out a loan in your name when you've given them no authority to do so! What a grievous evil this is! You know it as well as I do. Imagine, too, if you were to be pulled over by a police officer only to find out later that this person had a fake badge, a stolen police car, and thus had no legitimate authority from the state whatsoever to act as he did. Really, this kind of evil may well make you sick to your stomach if you think about it, at least it does for me. And these examples I've mentioned are concerned with temporal, worldly matters. Now think how serious it is, then, when people dare to preach and teach publicly in the name of God when He hasn't authorized them to do this, when peoples' souls and salvation are at stake, and when eternal consequences are on the line.

Make no mistake, dear ones, we should all stand in fear of God's terrible wrath against anyone who presume to preach and gain the trust of God's people without being officially sent by Him to do so in accord with His holy will. Old Testament lesson shows that even from the days of old, unauthorized prophets and pretenders have long plagued the people of God. And surely you know that you don't have to go far to find many who do the same now in our own day. You don't have to go far to find self-appointed, self-ordained "prophets" who would presume to be teachers in Christ's church without the proper authorization. And do not be deceived: despite their appearance, they are wolves ready to devour you, to seize you for their own purposes and steal you away from the path of life, as our Lord says. And they will not stand

in the Judgment, nor will their hearers if they do not repent and cease partaking of the fruit of their lips. This will be the second point I want to make about what makes false prophets what they are.

But before, I go any further, dear ones, I hope that in our Lord's dire warning against these imposters, that you not only begin to see anew the evil of false prophets for what it is, but that you also see the burning love Christ has for you, which is why He warns you about them so strongly in the first place. For he would not have you share in the destruction that awaits them. No. Christ would have all of you enjoy eternal life with God our Father through Him in the communion of the Holy Spirit. That's what He's so zealous for. That's what He wants. And so too, He wants you to recognize and give thanks for the love He's shown you in sending rightly called and ordained servants here to care for this congregation as He's done for well over a hundred years. For by no means are Pastor Wright and I acting on our own authority when we preach and teach and administer the Sacraments in your midst—far from it. We've been called by God through the Church in an orderly and legitimate way so that you would have no doubt whatsoever as to what grounds we have for doing them, that it's God Himself working through us for your benefit. In fact, we've been given orders by God to do specific work on His behalf, and we act in an official capacity when we preach the gospel to you, when we forgive your sins, when we judge and reject doctrine that is contrary to the gospel, and should it be necessary, in excluding unrepentant sinners from this congregation (AC XXVIII)—may God spare us from the unpleasantness of that work in particular. But these things are what the Lutheran confessions say you can and should expect us to do. It's what you should expect any good pastor to do, and as the Small Catechism teaches in the table of duties, God would have you receive and honor the

servants whom He Himself has sent you and who lawfully undertake to do these things. This is pleasing in His sight.

And so then, as far as I've laid it out up to this point, if one thing that makes a false prophet what he is is to act publicly on God's behalf without being rightly called to do so, another more important thing is when a preacher and teacher of the church promotes false doctrine, whether he's been legitimately placed into the pastoral office or not. Christ our Lord says, "you will recognize [false prophets] by their fruits." For a tree's fruit reveals to you the health of the tree, which isn't always so easy to see with the naked eye. And so it is that by the evil fruit of the false prophet, the fruit of their lips, which is above all else his false teaching, you will truly know him for what he is. You have no need, dear ones, for anyone to tell you not to buy and eat bad fruit from the grocery store. You have no need for someone to tell you not to give repulsive, corrupted fruit to your children to eat with their lunch. And when it comes to partaking of the evil "fruit" of false prophets, surely you must also know that this is poisonous to your souls. It's poisonous to the souls of your children, and false doctrine will lead to destruction.

Christ Himself shows us this reality in the latter half of our text. Jesus says many will say at the Judgment, "Lord, Lord," Kyrie, Kyrie, "did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works *in your name*?" Three times they invoke the name of the Lord. Three times they bring up the seemingly magnificent works that were supposedly worked in connection with it—works which they think would be impossible if God were not with them—works which seem to glitter and shine with all the splendor of God Himself and seem to advance His kingdom tangibly, miraculously even, but which, in the end, are all for naught. And Christ shows us that no matter how pious and learned they appear, all false teachers

with their corrupt teachings, along with all their followers sharing in their corruption and all their works put together will be utterly consumed in the fire of judgment when He says to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” And for my part, I simply have to say in all sincerity and sobriety that having the gentle gaze of so great a Savior be turned from you in displeasure like this, to be cut off from Him and to have His holy face hidden from you without end is a fate I wouldn’t wish on anyone. But as I said before, so I say again, the whole reason, dear ones, that Christ preaches to you against the false prophets is because He doesn’t want this to be your end. He would not have you share in their destruction but would gather you to Himself, into His embrace. So great is His love for you and His zeal for your salvation through right faith in Him.

And so here, then, is my commitment to all of you—and I’ll end with this. I know you heard me do this just last week but nevertheless, it’s important for me to tell you again directly and that you hear from my own mouth once more that I pledge you my faithfulness in preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God from holy Scripture as we confess it in the Book of Concord. I have made this confession my own and it’s my honor and privilege to do so. I’ve studied this confession for many years and I hold it with a clear conscience. So please pray for Pastor Wright and I regularly, then, and support us as we labor strenuously for your sake so that you would have a lively, robust faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, that you would relish the abundant mercy and goodness of God our Father, Who sent His Son to die for all of your sins, to bring you out of the corrupt and evil ways of this world and to raise you up from the dead, that by believing in Him, you would have life in His name. This is certainly the will of God our Father in heaven; this is my wish for all of you.

And to Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.