

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

[Jesus said] “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

The Christian faith is a matter of life and death. Really, it's more than that even, it's eternity. Jesus teaches that in the Gospel reading today and calls out those Jews and anyone who would not listen to him. Those who reject Christ and his word are of their father, the devil. This Sunday of the Church Year always sounds harsh to us because it is. These words are meant to sting and crush hard hearts. Jesus does that though, not just to be edgy or contrary. When you look at what Jesus says here in this teaching today, he shows the truth of God's word is divisive. Truth, by its very nature separates itself over and above error or falsehood.

When you consider though the call of Jesus today to keep his word and you will never see death this is most certainly true. So, does what he says describe you? Think about that and look at your life. First Jesus speaks these words after he teaches at length the importance of hearing him. The Jews weren't hearing Jesus. Yes, they were listening to him speak but they weren't hearing him in the sense of understanding these words of Jesus as the truth, taking them seriously and to heart, and then conforming their lives to those words. No, they listened for the purposes of trying to trap Jesus, test him, or find something they could use against him and have him killed. “Hearing they weren't hearing and seeing they were not seeing” as Jesus said to them.

Jesus said, “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”

Jesus crushes them with his words. Jesus rips open the curtain revealing who they really are as they stand before him. There is no greater accusation against these Jews that Jesus could make. The men who stand before Jesus here claim Abraham as their father and thereby a sonship with God. He calls them out for their rejection, shows them they are of the devil, and reveals their true nature is quite something. Their response is like what we heard two weeks ago when Jesus cast out a demon from a man. They accused Jesus of being unclean and having a demon here in John's Gospel. That's because their father was the devil, the father of lies. Is that harsh what Jesus said? Yes. It is true what Jesus said? Yes. Their father was indeed the devil because anyone who is not of God is of the devil. It's no different for people today.

Jesus responds with more revealing words, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

Let those words of Jesus sink in for a minute and consider what he is saying to you. “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” The only way Jesus can make that comment is if he is God himself. God alone is the one who gives life. And that's the thing here isn't? The Jews are mad at Jesus because he's proclaiming that he's God and the ramifications of it.

The purpose of all this intense discussion is not simply for Jesus to get them all riled up for no reason. He's teaching them and us what God does and what it means to hear his words and believe those words. It's quite simple, as Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” There's no wiggle room in this truth that Jesus speaks. Keeping his word is actually believing it and not just paying lip service to God. It's clinging to it and holding fast to it in knowledge, assent, and trust. The example of this faith is seen in the Old Testament reading.

Go back to that vivid story and image with Abraham and Isaac. Here is Abraham who was told to sacrifice his only son and was about to do so when God stopped him. There's so much that could be said there in this account but in the

places where the New Testament does talk about it, the purpose and point is always on trusting God's word of promise. Hebrews 11, for example, says, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

You see in Abraham an example for your life in Christ. Not to go sacrifice your kid but the fervent steadfast trust in God's promise that even if Abraham would have spilled the blood of his own son God would raise him up from the dead. Why? Because God had promised, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." Isaac was a boy in the reading today and had not married Rebekah yet. He didn't have any offspring, but Abraham knew he would because God said it would be through him that his offspring would be named. Galatians tells us that this offspring, singular, referred Christ. Not only would the physical descendants of Abraham come through Isaac but the Messiah himself would come from this line. Abraham heard and kept the word of God and Isaac did not taste death. Abraham too contrary to the people in the reading who said he died, was living as he believed in Christ and did not see death. He is living and saw Jesus the day he departed from this world.

When you apply these things to the world today, to your own self, and how you go about your day-to-day life what is it that you rise each morning and think about? How often throughout the day is your mind thinking about God's word, his commandments, and his promises? Is your life guided by God's word or is it something or someone else? The decisions you make in your life every day are to be formed by the new heart, spirit, and mind that God has given to you. Now God is not going to tell you which car to drive but his word orients you to how you prioritize things in your life, how you view your job, your family, your friends, and the whole world around you. God's word warns you what is harmful to your neighbor and what is the good and godly path he has laid before you for your good. It forms your decision making. It provides and forms what you and your family gather around and talk about and pray. It sees times of joy and suffering through God's word and Christ crucified and risen for you. It forms what you sacrifice for and endure for the sake of the future glory to come. God lifts your eyes to horizon and strengthens and keeps you as this life soldiers on and you have hope in it all. And in all this, God is at work through his word to accomplish his purposes in your life. These are things the Introit today from Psalm 43 echoes when it says, "Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me! For you are the God in whom I take refuge. Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling!"

That's what Jesus is talking about when he said to the Jews and to you, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." Keeping his word means treasuring, guarding, holding fast, not letting go, persisting in it, and preserving it. All these concepts are used throughout the New Testament for this word that Jesus uses here in when he says this about his word.

He is calling you to take his word just as seriously because it is a matter of life and death, eternal life. But this isn't what we see when we look around us and at our own sinful hearts. Listen to Jesus today and take to heart what he says. Don't separate yourself from the words of eternal life.

One of the saddest things as a pastor is not dealing with death. The death of a Christian, while sad, is still a reason to rejoice. The saddest thing as a pastor is apathy. It's a total lack of care for God's word and taking these things seriously. There are many times the word of God is met with eye rolls, ignoring, or in one ear and out the other.

When God's word isn't kept in your life and you stop hearing God's word then you just go on with your life living in love with the world rather than in love with the things of God. It's no surprise then when you can't bear to hear God's word and want to think Jesus is wrong in his words. It's one thing to have Jesus who is there when it's convenient for you and it's another thing when he is active in your life and cares about you enough to call you to repentance. How many of you gladly say you believe and follow Jesus but what about when God's word challenges your way of thinking

and living in your lives or those close to you? But what does Jesus say, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” Lord, have mercy upon us. It’s a matter of life and death.

Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”

Today marks the beginning of what is known as “Passiontide.” Things have gotten “amped up” so to speak. The betrayal, false witness, torture, suffering, cries of “crucify him,” and the cross are all coming. They wanted to kill Jesus in this reading today, but it wasn’t time for that yet. They’d get their chance. But God uses even the evil plots and schemes of men for his purposes. Jesus loves and keeps God’s word. The glory of the Father is revealed in saving you in Christ which he has done and gives it to you through his means of grace. The glory of Jesus is hidden or veiled in suffering. He takes up his sorrows willingly in obedience to the Father. “My song is love unknown, my Savior loves to me, love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be. Oh, who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?”

We are sinners and our hope is in the Lord who died for sinners. Who are we that he should do this? We are nobody but it’s only out of his divine mercy and grace has he done this for you. The Father loves the Son, and the Son is your Redeemer. There’s nowhere else to go and no one else to hear. It’s only Jesus and him crucified for you. “Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me! For you are the God in whom I take refuge.” Flee for refuge to him and cast your sin upon the one who has atoned for it. Make use of your baptism where the Lord washed away your sin, rescued you from death, and the devil, and gave you eternal salvation. Return to him and live.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” Jesus is true in what he says even as he is the truth and the life. You won’t see death when you are in Christ, which is you won’t see the second eternal death that you rightly deserve. Instead, you see life as you have Christ who is the Resurrection and the Life. And even though you should die in this world you will still live, and your body raised to incorruption on the last day. The Jews in the reading hated Jesus because he gave life. The devil was their father, and the devil lies along with this world which he roams about seeking to devour prey. Don’t buy into the lies they will kill you and you will see death. Repent and see the Lord of life and hear his words. Find joy in his words too as they show you the paths of righteousness and life lived in this word which is a life of freedom to truly live. It’s a life lived looking toward the life to come where the devil, his lies, and follows have been sealed in the pit. Christ gives to you eternal life out of his grace. He speaks with the authority of God himself and is obedient to the Father. That glory, the glory of the Father in offering up the Son and the obedience of Jesus, is your glory as his life is your life.

Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” What beautiful words to trust and cling to knowing you have life in Christ. “Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine! Never was love, dear King, never was grief like thine. This is my friend, in who sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.”

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