

Eighth Sunday after Trinity, August 7, 2022

Guest Preacher: Rev. Dinku Bato from Lutheran Heritage Foundation

Readings: *Jeremiah 23: 16-29, Acts 20: 27-38, Matthew 7: 15-23*

Beware of False Prophets

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Deceit has its strength in masquerading as the truth. False prophets speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord (Jer. 23:16–29). They deny the judgment of the Lord, speaking peace to the unrepentant, when in truth there is condemnation and wrath. *“You will recognize them by their fruits”* (Matt. 7:20). The *“fruits”* of a true prophet are not outward righteousness or success but faithfulness in proclaiming the Word of the Lord. This is the will of the Father in heaven, that pastors take heed to the flock, the Father’s adopted ones (Rom. 8:12–17), warning them against the wolves and their lies, and shepherding the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:27–38). For indeed, the cross is that good tree bearing good fruit—namely, the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

Sermon Transcript:

Peace and grace from God, our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm very glad to be here with you this morning. As you have heard, my name is Dinku Bato from Ethiopia, but I live in Minnesota, Inver Grove Heights, some 20 miles southeast of the Twin Cities. That's been 10 years since we began living in that area with my family, my wife, and three boys. I'm happy also to get this chance to speak about Lutheran Heritage Foundation today. More will be in the Bible hours, but as Pastor has told you earlier, you have helped us translate the Small Catechism in [inaudible 00:00:58], the first four sections of it in three more languages. We have so far translated these materials and others in more than 121 languages, three of them would be yours. And we work in 80 countries worldwide. Lutheran Heritage Foundation has been established 30 years ago. And so far we have covered, as I said, 80 countries and more than 1,200 titles, including children's Bible Story, Youth Bible Stories, Small Catechism, Large Catechism, Book of Concord in these languages. Therefore, we also want to thank you for what you have done. As I said, more will be during the Bible study hours on PowerPoint presentation.

For today, I would base my sermon on Matthew Chapter 7, the text that has been read and also touch upon the other two texts that we read. As you have heard, Jesus now is concluding His sermon, three-chapters-long sermon that we call “Sermon on the Mountain” from Matthew Chapter 5. And the end is Chapter 7. And our text today comes from that conclusion when He's wrapping up His long sermon with a title: Watch, Behold, Beware. If you see the text that precedes our today's texts, Jesus was teaching about the narrow gate and the wide gate, the hard way and the easy way. A life of disciple or discipleship or following Christ starts by entering the narrow gate that is trusting Jesus Christ who died for us on the cross and following Him on the hard way, that is following Him, bearing one's cross. The entrance achieved and initiated by the Holy Baptism, ushers in the concurrent benefit of the remission of sins and new life in Christ. That is salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

This salvation, this gift needs to be guarded as today's text commands us, "Watch. Beware. Be on your guard for the enemy has infiltrated the flock," as you have heard, "ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing." Or as Paul refers to them in our text today, "As fierce wolves that come in among you and from among your own." Yet in another place, Jesus warns us or His disciples about the enemy planting weeds or tares among the wheat. Not corn, not beans, but tares that looks much like wheat growing.

In a similar manner, Jude, the Apostle, brother of James, writes to those who have been called, who are loved in God, the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ. That's how he addresses them. Not to new Christians, but to the ones who are loved by God and kept for Jesus Christ. That's what he is referring them as, and he tells them this... I quote from his epistle, it's only one chapter long, but I will take the introduction. It says this, "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and argue to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago, have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ, our only sovereign and Lord." These false prophets that are mentioned in our text today are evidently self-appointed, neither commissioned by God, nor called by the church. God speaks about this type of prophets in our first reading as you have heard earlier, Jeremiah 23, "I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message. I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied."

In my home continent of Africa, for example, some claims of prophetic power verge on the ludicrous and irrational. Yet in an era of social media, their claims make them even more popular as poor and desperate people look for help wherever they can. Some years back, two self-proclaimed prophets from two different countries in the southern part of the continent both announced they had found cures for HIV/AIDS, preventing patients from seeking medical help. Another preacher in West Africa, encourages followers to eat grass, while another sprays insecticide on congregants to exercise or cast out evil spirits. You might have heard such stories worldwide. When these people are not healed, to add insult to injury, they say you don't have inner faith.

The false prophets Jesus warns us about look like us. They speak our language. They utter the prophecies by the name of their prophecies, by the name of God, the God we all worship. As Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." They sing the song we sing. They quote from the Bible we all read, but cunningly add to it or subtract from it, twisting it as it fits their selfish purpose.

As Paul mentioned in his farewell message today says, "Speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them," in Acts 20. They twist the Word of God for their own purpose to draw disciples away and spread division. False prophets, like the "Health and Wealth Gospel" preachers, sometimes we call it the "Prosperity Gospel", have cleverly learned to mimic what impoverished or troubled followers are desperate to hear. In our text reading today, you have heard a text that says, "They keep saying to those who despise me, 'The Lord says you will have peace.' And to all who follow the stubbornness of their heart, they say, 'No harm will come to you.'" Despite awareness of their abuses, self-proclaimed prophets retain thousands of followers who continue to fund their activities. Perhaps more than any time in the history of the church, the Christian message today has been made accessible to many people, accelerated by the social media and different communication technologies. Much as it helped the spread of the Gospel and the Christian message, it unfortunately also has become the chief instrument of disseminating a diluted gospel, a different gospel.

Therefore, the Lord through our Scripture readings today wants us to watch, to be on guard, to pay no attention to what they say and do as we heard it in Matthew 7. In a different place, Jesus in John 8:18 says, "Take care how you listen." Jeremiah also reminds his listeners, "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you. They fill you with false hopes. They speak vision from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord." And Paul, again in Acts 20 that we read earlier, cautions the nascent church in Ephesus by this word, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock. Be alert."

In the process of identifying false prophets that come in all shape and sizes, Jesus emphasizes the fourth criteria that is, fruit is mentioned as you heard some six or seven times, and Jesus repeats the statement, "You will recognize them by their fruits." Yes, discerning fruits might take time and needs patience, but that is the only way to recognize false prophets or false teachers. As Jesus indicated, you can't expect grapes from thorn bush nor fig from thistles. Now, Paul in his epistle to the Galatians, tells us what this fruits look like. Galatians 5:19, Paul mentioned some of the bad fruits or fruits of the flesh. Sexual immorality, impurity, sexuality, adultery, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and things like this. This, I believe, is why Jesus had addressed them as, "Workers of lawlessness, depart from Me."

In contrast to these fruits, Paul also mentions the good fruits, good fruits of the spirit in the same place, Galatians 5:22, love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. What do you see on the false prophets? What kind of fruit? The bad fruits or the good fruits? These are the only criteria. As followers of Christ, therefore we are called to be fruit inspectors, not for the purpose of judgment, that is the responsibility of the owner of the harvest, but to help us stay away from the bad fruits. For a bad fruit can spoil the whole bunch.

There is a day as Jesus mentions, on which the final verdict will be given. In our text, Jesus speaks about that day, in verse 22. Luther also speaks of two days on his calendar, this day and that day. These are the only days on Luther's calendar. The judgment, that is, "I never knew you. Depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness," is stated on the basis of what the false prophets and their followers have been engaged in as they describe it in their unintentional self-incriminating words. "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and cast out demons in Your name and do many mighty works in Your name?" Note how all these activities they mention are work-based or performances. What we call, works righteousness. Didn't you do this? Didn't you do that? They also speak as if they know God, "Lord, Lord," nothing but head knowledge or information while their hearts were devoid of faith in Christ to save us. And works that doesn't come from faith doesn't do any good for without faith, it is impossible to please God, as Hebrew 11, the chapter of faith reminds us. That, I believe is why Jesus finally declares to them, "I never knew you."

In our Gospel text, Jesus plainly states what is needed to enter the Kingdom of God, "Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But the one who does the will of my Father, who is in Heaven." Then the question would be, what is that will of God to be done? Jesus clearly has shown what this will of God is all about. In John 6:40, for instance, He states, "This is a will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life. And I will raise him up upon the last day."

John also tells us in his first epistle, what this will of God is. "And this is His commandment," John tells us in 1 John 3:23, "that we believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He has commanded us," that is a will of God. Blessed or happy are we, for we are on the right track. Entered the

narrow gate through the Holy Baptism and having the body, the blood and the words for our nourishment, strengthening us to keep working in the hard way until we enter eternity, the place top and glorious feature God has prepared for the ones He loved and loves Him.

In the meantime, all of the Scripture texts for today invite us to dwell in the Word of God that will enable us to refute and overcome the constant attack of false prophets and the enemy. Paul says in our text today, "And now I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." And Jeremiah also brings us toward the Word of God, that is powerful. At the end, it says, Jeremiah 23:29, "Is not My Word like fire?" declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces." We have this Word that can help us, this Word of the Spirit, which is the Word of God as Paul in Ephesians tells us. Luther also writing on this text advises us, writing saying, "You must hold onto the chief parts, the summary of Christian teaching and accept nothing else that God has sent and given Christ, His Son and that only through Him, does He forgive us all our sins, justify and save us."

May the word of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.