

Eighth Sunday after Trinity, July 30, 2023

Readings: *Jeremiah 23: 16-29, Romans 8: 15-16, 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

We begin in the name of God, the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The text for this morning's message, as I mentioned, is part of the Epistle reading that we had for this morning. Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are many things in life you and I may not understand. For some people it's modern art. A young woman goes to her first show at an art gallery. She studies the paintings carefully. On one, this huge canvas, it's black with all these yellow blobs splattered all over it. The next painting is a murky gray color that has drips purple paint streaked across it. And she walks over to the artist and says, "I don't understand your paintings." "I paint what I feel inside," explains the artist. She looks at the paintings once more and asks, "Have you ever tried Alka-Seltzer?"

Now, some of us may not understand modern art. Some of us may not understand some kinds of music, opera, rap, for example, or other forms of rock music. I read recently that termites eat through wood two times faster, listening to rock music. That doesn't have any particular significance. I just thought it was interesting. There are many things in life we don't understand. I saw the top 10 things that men understand about women, and besides each number, the line is blank. Now, in Christian doctrine, the teaching of the Holy Spirit, or I mean, the Holy Trinity is difficult, is difficult for us to understand. God in three persons, blessed Trinity. I believe it, but do I fully understand it?

Pastor Keith Krell tells of spending time with his oldest child, Joshua, several years ago, and while Krell was sitting in his recliner, Joshua went over to his toy bag and grabbed a tennis ball and brought it to him, and Joshua then went back to the bag and got a small Nerf ball and returned it to his father as well. Lastly, Joshua went and picked up a mini basketball and did the same thing. Then he tried to carry all three of the balls out of his father's lap and hold them. But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't hold all three. His hands were not big enough to

hold all three balls at one time. And the Trinity is like that, says Pastor Krell. Three in one is just more than our small finite minds can grasp. And that's true.

Still, it is imperative that we acknowledge this important doctrine of our faith in God. God comes to us in three persons. God is the creator of all that lives and moves and has being. God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sins. And God is present with us in the form of the Holy Spirit to comfort us, to encourage us, and to give us strength. It is that third person of God's nature, the Holy Spirit, which is important in our text for today from Romans, and particularly how God's Spirit delivers us from one of life's most difficult problems, the problem of fear. Paul writes, beginning with the 15th verse, "For ye did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." Focus on these words for a moment, "You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear."

So I want to begin by asking you this. What is it that you are afraid of? Everyone's afraid of something. Saddam Hussein was one of the truly most horrific dictators of our time, and many people lived in fear of him, so perhaps it's fitting that according to reports from some of his aides, the dictator's own life was ruled by fear. He moved from one place to another place, always in secret for fear of assassination. He rarely enjoyed a full night's sleep. All his food was tested for poison. He trusted very few people, even in his own cabinet. Even when he was getting up in years and was troubled with a bad back, Saddam worked very hard to appear the picture of health and vigor in front of his countrymen. And we attribute the number of his own countrymen that he put to death to his innate evil, but it may be that it was more a result of fear. Fear of being deposed, fear of losing his power or even his life. Fear is indeed a troubling aspect in everybody's life.

There was an article in Newsweek sometime back about a young truck driver whose route takes him across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge every day. The thought entered the trucker's mind that one day he just might feel compelled to stop his truck climb out and leap from the bridge to his death. There was no rational reason to hold such a belief, but that very fear took complete hold of his life. He finally asked his wife to handcuff him to the steering wheel so that he could fully be assured that his deepest fear wouldn't come true. We simply cannot know how many people allow secret fears to torment them or at least keep them from being the full productive person they might be.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, and Kanter tells of a revealing story of a fabric company that made complicated woven materials. Yarn breakage during production was a long-standing problem, adding to the cost and representing a competitive disadvantage. A new executive who believed in opening the search for ideas and innovation to all employees held a meeting to discuss the need for change. A veteran worker who had joined the company as a young immigrant tentatively suggested an idea for ending the breakage and it worked. And when asked how long he had that idea, the worker responded, "32 years." 32 years he sat on an idea that could save his employer money. Nobody had asked for his input before. But more distressing, he had not had the courage before then to speak up.

Fear, how it drains us, how it defeats us, and there are plenty of things to worry about. And one of the very real fears in today's world is that of terrorism. According to the professional trend forecaster, Faith Popcorn, there's a new type of terrorism known as distance terrorism. Terrorist attacks once had to be perpetrated in person, but according to Ms. Popcorn, the internet has changed all that. Today, cyber-terrorists are capable of creating enormous damage without ever leaving their homes from anywhere in the world. And Christopher Kaslow, who is a counter-terrorism expert and the author of the authoritative book, *James Counter-Terrorism*, warns of terrorism that can, for example, cause large loss of life by remotely altering medication formulas at pharmaceutical manufacturing plants. He also notes that terrorists can destroy an entire suburban block by remotely changing the pressure in natural gas lines, resulting in valve failure and escaping gas. Distance terrorism, which can make certain that the population of a nation will not be able to eat, drink, or move. This will never be too far from our minds as we move into an uncertain and dangerous period.

Everyone is afraid. I don't know what you're afraid of. Some people are afraid of the loss of control. Others are afraid of failure. Some are haunted by the fear of being alone. Everyone is afraid. What matters is how we deal with those fears. And St. Paul writes, "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear." God's desire is to relieve us of our fears. Now, how is that done? We defeat fear when we acknowledge our fear and seek comfort in God's Word. We cure no fear by constantly avoiding it.

Rachel Naomi Remen, MD in her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom, Stories That Heal*, tells about her uncle who was a hero in World War II. He was a physician who was following the troops one day, and acting on false information, the soldiers pressed forward believing the ridge on which they were advancing had been cleared of enemy fire. As they moved out of cover, the hidden enemy opened fire, and within seconds the field was covered with wounded and dying soldiers. The enemy continued to blanket the area with live fire. No one could stand upright. It was more than 12 hours before air reinforcements could cripple the enemy position. Her uncle, crawling on his belly with supplies strapped to his back, applied tourniquets, stopped bleeding, took messages, sometimes written on the back of worn photographs and prayed with them during all that time. When reinforcements came and the enemy was pulled back, it was clear that he had saved dozens of lives. He was decorated for his action and his picture was on the front page of a national magazine. Ms. Remen was seven years old when all that occurred, and she was frankly surprised that her uncle was so brave. Her uncle was short, balding and wore glasses. He even had a little pot-belly. Always a shy man, he seemed uncomfortable with all the fuss and uneasy as neighbor after neighbor came by to shake his hand. And finally young Rachel found her moment. Climbing up onto his lap, she told him how brave she thought he was and that she was sure he was never afraid of anything. Smiling, he told her that this was far from the case, that he had been more frightened than ever before in his life. Severely disappointed, she blurted out, "But why did they give you a medal then?" Well, he explained to her that anyone who wasn't afraid in situations like war was a fool. And they don't give medals to people who are fools. That being brave does not mean being afraid. It means being afraid and doing it anyway.

Her uncle was very wise. We never solve our fears by running away from them. If you're afraid of sharing your faith in a group, if you're afraid of trusting your instincts, if you're afraid of

taking a risk of any kind, it won't help to give into those fears. It's like being afraid of crossing a bridge. That fear won't go away by forever taking another path home. We deal with our fear when we acknowledge and confront it. And that is why our faith is so important to us. We are not alone as we face our fears. God, through the power of the Holy Spirit is with us. Paul writes, "Remember these words for you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. You have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God." It's so important that we know who we are. We are God's children. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We do not go into any situation alone. That's the practical implication of the Holy Spirit. God created us. Christ saved us. The Holy Spirit is with us.

Time Magazine had a cover sometime back that was quite striking. In bold letters, big bold letters was the phrase, Fear Not. That was quite heartening to people with biblical background for those words come straight from Scripture. But the good news Time was proclaiming was not about faith in God. Rather, it was about how science is offering new hope for treating all our fears. Fear not. And that's fine. Many people with deep-seated fears are helped by some of the drugs that are being produced by modern science. And you should not be ashamed if you are taking a prescription medication for anxiety or depression or any deep-seated emotional problem. Still, the news from science, as helpful as it is, pales beside the original, "Fear not", spoken by an angel at the empty tomb 2000 years ago. "And the angel answered and said unto the women, fear not for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here for He is risen, as He said."

And that's why St. Paul could write what we have received. We have received a spirit that makes us not a slave to our fear. We are not a slave to our fear. On a logical basis, why would anyone who truly believes in the resurrection of Christ fear anything? Death has been defeated. The worst that the world can throw at us cannot destroy us. Christ is alive and just as important through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is with us, encouraging us, telling us that we matter to God, helping us confront every obstacle. The most complete victory that we can win over fear is to walk hand in hand with Christ.

I will close with this story about a little boy who had to walk each evening past a dark spooky house. Some adults thought to give him courage. One handed him a good luck charm to ward off the ghosts. Another had a light put on the dreaded corner. And still another said, earnestly. "It's sinful to be afraid. Trust God and be brave." Well, that advice was well-meant, but not very helpful. And someone said, with compassion, "I know what it is to be afraid. I will walk with you past the house." He did not remove the fear, except to lift it from the shoulders of that child and place it on his own.

That is what Christ wants to do for you. Trust Him. As you sit by the bedside of someone you love, you're not alone. He's there. When you're called to deal with the pressure of the workplace and you doubt your ability to cope, there's an encourager there beside you who wants you to know you matter. Walk with competence. "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Amen.