

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 26, 2018
Isaiah 29:11-19
“Wonder of Wonders”

The warning of our Old Testament lesson is quite simple, frightening and timely: for those who do not have faith, the Scriptures remain a closed book—unbelievers cannot comprehend the Word of God. However, this does not stop unbelievers from thinking that they do understand the Word of God— that they have the correct understanding and that believers have it wrong. Thus, the Word of God will often be invoked to defend all sorts of false teaching and sin.

That’s the warning. Here’s the Good News: the Lord is always faithful.

The people of Isaiah’s time had the Word, but they couldn’t understand it. To them it was a sealed book: when they tried to read it, it was as if they were illiterate. It didn’t make sense.

There was a simple reason why they couldn’t understand it: they didn’t have faith. Except for a faithful remnant in Isaiah’s time, the people of Judah had turned away from the one true God to idols.

While they’d rejected the Word, they still had other things—they had the outer trappings of the faith they’d left behind. They had the temple, they had priests, and they had rituals; but these were now used for idol worship: at the temple, the priests performed rituals for false gods. They had the outer trappings, but they did not have the Word. In their sin, they believed that their actions and idol worship were pleasing to the one true God. After all, they still had the temple; and as long as they were doing these things at God’s house, they reasoned, He must be pleased with their efforts. And when prophets like Isaiah called them to repentance, it was easy for them to reason that the prophets were the ungodly trouble-makers...and perhaps they should be silenced for good.

Through Isaiah, the Lord declared that the people had turned things upside down. He said that they were like clay, trying to mold the potter. Remember, God had called them to be His chosen people, and had given them His Word so that they might remain His people. Instead, they had adopted all sorts of doctrines and practices contrary to His Word; and now they expected Him to approve. Thus He declared, “This people draw near with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, while their hearts are far from Me” (Isaiah 29:13). The Lord wasn’t about to be molded by them to fit their sinful desires: instead, He condemned their idol worship for the false doctrine that it was. Unless they repented, judgment was coming.

But the Lord also repeated His promise of the Messiah. He declared that He would “do wonderful things,” “with wonder upon wonder;” and the wonderful things of the Lord would cause man’s sinful wisdom to perish. What would these wonders be? He spelled it out: the deaf would hear. The blind would see. The meek would obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor

among mankind would “exult in the Holy One of Israel.” The Holy One, the Savior, would come. He was the promised wonder.

Because the people had no faith, they couldn’t understand the Word of God. However, blinded by their unbelief, they believed that their sinful doctrines and practices were God-pleasing anyway. The Lord condemned their false teaching; but He also made the promise that the Holy One, the Savior, would come.

You hear of the Holy One in our Gospel lesson: Jesus Christ is in the midst of His ministry. He is making the blind see and the deaf hear. He is giving hope and joy to the poor and the meek. The Lord has kept His promise, and wonderful things are happening!

The Pharisees and scribes are unhappy with this Messiah, though; and their present complaint is that the disciples do not wash their hands before they eat. This is a serious matter to them. They’ve made it a law that you have to wash your hands before you eat—it’s not in the Bible, but they’re teaching it’s a sin not to wash your hands before you eat. Just to be clear, I’m all for personal hygiene, but there’s a more sinister problem at work. In their painstaking care of the Law, the Pharisees have concluded that you’re saved by keeping the Law—most certainly including all of the little rules that they’ve added to it themselves. They’re teaching salvation by works. How can this be? After all, this is not what the Bible teaches, and they’re the ones who are the keepers of the Scriptures. But while they hold the scrolls, they have no faith. Because they have no faith, they cannot rightly understand the Word. However, they are completely convinced that they’ve gotten the Word right. And if they’re right, this can only mean that Jesus is wrong! Thus, they reject Jesus and believe that it is the godly thing to do!

It is no surprise that Jesus quotes our Old Testament lesson against them: “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’” (Mark 7:6-7). This is exactly what they’ve done: they’ve rewritten God’s plan for salvation, and now they expect the Son of God to conform to their revision. But once again, the Master Potter refuses to be molded by the clay, and He rebukes them for their unbelief. You know what happens: the Pharisees and scribes plot to kill Jesus, eventually succeeding. If God isn’t going to approve of their religion, then it’s time to kill off God. How blind in sin can they be?

But the Lord is faithful, and He has promised wonderful things. The miracles of healing for the blind and deaf are wonderful, yes; but there is a wonder of wonders left, one that confounds the wisdom of men. It is the cross. By His death, Jesus makes the sacrifice for the sins of the world. On the cross, He endures God’s judgment for sin. Risen again, He declares forgiveness and eternal life—not for all who think they earn it by their works and goodness, but for all who believe in Him. This is utter nonsense to the Pharisees: to them, Jesus is the victim of their plans. To them His cross isn’t God’s will for salvation, but the death of a blasphemer so that they can get back to teaching that you earn your way to heaven. To trust in the crucified Savior

just doesn't make sense to them in their wisdom. But once again, remember: without faith, the things of God cannot be correctly understood. They seem foolish.

St. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, and quotes our Old Testament lesson while doing so: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." The cross is the foolishness of God. A life of repentance and trusting in "Christ crucified" doesn't make sense to those without faith. But this "foolishness of God" is the power of salvation to all who believe. All of man's wisdom, put together, cannot save a single soul. By His cross, Jesus has died for the sins of all.

So in two of our readings, we've seen how, without faith, man cannot understand the Scriptures but still claims to be obeying God. We've also seen God's faithfulness in Christ, providing salvation for all who do believe.

There is nothing new under the sun. Given these two readings, as well as our epistle on marriage between a man and a woman, another example stands close at hand. I have talked with many of you about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who several years ago now voted to ordain pastors who are in "committed, monogamous, same-sex relationships." Many delegates actually opposed the decision, but the ELCA has now officially declared that practicing, unrepentant homosexuals may serve as pastors in its congregations.

Clearly, the Bible condemns homosexuality as sinful. Clearly, this decision departs from Scripture. Given our readings, however, it is not unexpected: long ago, the church bodies which would form the ELCA argued that the Bible isn't God's inerrant Word. They said that Scripture might be the best place to "encounter God," but it isn't always right. With that seed planted, it was only a matter of time until all sorts of sins would find approval in the church's doctrine.

And yet, the ELCA claims God's blessing for doing so. This decision was made while invoking the name of the one true God. The report which paved the way for this decision is full of citations from Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions and the writings of Martin Luther. One ELCA pastor exulted on her blog following the decision by quoting Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."

This however was not done by the strength of Christ. It was not a courageous act of love, and it was not done in service to the Gospel. It was a public expression of support for sexual sin. Far worse, it was a public declaration that God now approves of what His Word describes as sexual

sin. It is one more example of what we've witnessed in our readings for today. Faith comes by hearing the Word. When one rejects the Word, one rejects faith. Without faith, sinners cannot understand the Scriptures. However, they will often think they do, and they will invoke God's name to justify sin.

Now, am I saying that everyone in the ELCA is an unbeliever? Of course not. Where the Word is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is at work to create and sustain faith. But unrepented sin destroys faith; and those who advocate immorality in Jesus' name have put their souls in grave danger. We pray for all within the ELCA as we pray for all in our own church body: that all might hear the Word, repent of their sins and rejoice in the forgiveness that Christ has won.

Again, such things don't happen overnight. It is why, as a Christian, you have the responsibility and privilege of vigilance. By the grace of God, your eyes have been opened: keep looking. You measure all things by the Word of God. You watch the synod to which you belong, because it also has the potential to stray from God's Word while thinking it obeys. You watch your own congregation. You listen to your pastors, for we are not immune. And you watch yourself, most of all, because you're made of sinful flesh, too. You have a large capacity to believe that you agree with Scripture when you've actually departed from it—we all do. You have the capacity to create a tradition of man and believe it to be a doctrine of God. In this, the devil delights: for if you believe that God approves of your sin, why would you ever depart from it?

So be vigilant. Be in the Word. Examine yourself. When you hear a part of a sermon or Bible class that you find distasteful, don't simply dismiss it with, "That's just one man's opinion." Measure it against God's Word for truth. And always remember that the sinful wisdom of man will often be attractive to your ears.

But remember all the more that God is faithful to you. He commands that you keep His name and Word holy. He demands obedience to His Law. He does not excuse your sins, whether you know of them or not. But He does forgive them. The Holy One of Israel has come—Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary for you. Because He has laid down His life for you on the cross, and then taken it up again, He speaks His grace to you. He gives you faith. He opens your ears to hear the words of His book. He opens your eyes to see His cross. He cleanses you of every spot, stain and blemish of sin so that you might be His holy bride forever. For while the teachings and "wisdoms" of man lead only to death, the doctrines of God declare that life is yours: for in the "foolishness" of "Christ and Him crucified," you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen