

Eighth Sunday After Trinity, A✠D, 2008

Matthew 7:15-23 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. ²¹ "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. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

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

1 Some Sundays it's easy to miss the point of the propers: the readings, collect, and Introit. Not this Sunday. The Prophet Jeremiah records, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord." St. Paul warns, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw the disciples after them." The Lord Jesus warns, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." And you prayed in the collect, "Grant to us, Lord, the Spirit to think...such things as are right."

2 Does the threat of false prophets give you cause for alarm? Jesus, St. Paul, the prophet Jeremiah, and the early church's authors of this collect seem to think they should. But not just any false prophets. Some are easy to detect. Wolves who make no pretensions about looking like sheep are easy to see. False prophets who make no claim to speak for the Lord are the easiest to detect. Scientists who decry belief in a Creator and those outside the church who lob criticisms at the church from afar are easy to avoid, or at least to ignore. Even some prophets who claim to speak for God, as when Oprah contends that no jealous God would be worthy of her worship, or when President Bush says that many religions worship the same god, can be easy to discern from true prophets. But those aren't the kinds of false prophets today's readings warn about.

3 The false prophets our Lord warns about today are those who adeptly guise themselves as true prophets. Even in the Lord's name they prophesy, cast out demons, and do many mighty works. These false prophets, these wolves in sheep's clothing are the most dangerous and hardest to detect, because they seem genuinely to speak for the Lord. God wants you to be happy, they say. If you're tired of your spouse, and

there's more happiness to be found in the arms of your secretary, God wants you to be happy. If you hear some juicy information, well, it's not really gossip unless the person it's about finds out you spread it, and, after all, God wants you to be happy. If two people truly love each other, marriage is optional; what counts is your happiness. If children just aren't convenient right now, God gave you freedom to choose abortion or contraception because he wants you to be happy. A God of love is certainly tolerant of lots of things His Word is intolerant of. After all, this is the 21st century. Jesus wants to make you rich or at least successful and comfortable, they preach.

4 According to Jeremiah, what matters to these false prophets is not getting sins forgiven but getting pews filled. "They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'" The false prophet gives hope where there should be warning and comfort where there should be commands. False prophets preach pious-sounding sermons, quoting Scripture, donning vestments, looking quite remarkably like innocent sheep.

5 Dr. Luther says, "A Christian, you see, has to learn that the devil can quote the truth and extol God's Word just as well as pious Christians. Whoever does not learn this is easily deceived and led astray, and then it is all over with him. For the person who allows himself to be fooled by sheep's clothing, him the wolf tears to pieces. That is why we need to say, I want gladly to hear God's Word and the truth; but before I rely too much on what I hear, I want to see whether it rhymes with my catechism and the preaching which I have heard up till now. The person, therefore, who is on his toes and not naively gullible, but searches the Word, that person has no problem. But the person who is lackadaisical about his catechism and the doctrine he has previously learned, with ears only for every whimsical fanatic, that person is done for."

6 So repent. Repent of giving ear to every prophet who claims to speak for the Lord. Repent of not examining sacred Scriptures and your catechism to see if what you hear spoken in the Lord's name—even from this pulpit—is truly the word of the Lord. Repent of seeking for prophets who give you fictitious good news and false hopes.

7 You will recognize prophets by their fruit. False prophets, like rotten trees, produce rotten fruit. A true prophet, like a healthy tree, bears healthy fruit. Not everyone who says to Jesus, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of the Father in heaven. If that's the standard, who

could be called a true prophet? Only One. The only One who does the will of His Father in Heaven is the One who calls His sheep to be wary of wolves. He alone does the Father's perfect will. It was the Father's will that the divine Son of God would bear the sins of the world and be hung upon the tree of the cross to die. There, from the rotten tree of the cross comes the healthy fruit, the life-giving fruit of forgiveness of sins. From that tree flow water and blood that give forgiveness and life to all who receive them. Jesus Christ is the one True Prophet.

8 Don't let the false prophets trick you into thinking sin is "no big deal." If it were no big deal, the cross would have been no big deal. If God were like a doting grandfather, winking away your sin, pretending you're a good enough boy or girl, the cross would have been unnecessary. Precisely because God's Law left no loopholes, no do-it-yourself salvation, because every sin is an abomination in God's eyes, every sin had to be answered for.

9 This True Prophet Jesus Christ, the Word-of-God-in-the-flesh, sent forth more prophets. And you will know them by their fruits. The fruit of a prophet is in what he preaches and teaches. And the True Prophet tells you Himself what His true prophets will come preaching: repentance and forgiveness of sins, in His name, proclaimed to all nations.

10 These fruits—repentance and forgiveness of sins—the Lord first delivered to you at your baptism. And He renews these gifts to you every time He gives you godly sorrow over your sin—repentance—and bids you hear words of absolution—forgiveness. His gifts are yours anew when you come in repentance to the Lord's Supper here to receive the fruit from the tree of the cross—the very Body and Blood of Jesus, the True Prophet, given to you for the forgiveness of your sins.

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

Soli Deo Gloria
Pastor Jeff Hemmer
Hope, Jerseyville, IL