

## The Eighth Sunday after Trinity, A ✕ D 2009

**Matthew 7:15-23** "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. <sup>21</sup> "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. <sup>22</sup> 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?' <sup>23</sup> 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 The warning from Jesus is as clear as it is stern. Beware false prophets. Not the kind who come in wolves' clothing, they're easy to avoid. Beware those who come in sheep's clothing; they're the most dangerous. Healthy trees bear good fruit. Diseased trees bear bad fruit. You can tell a false prophet by his fruit, by his preaching. Not everyone who calls out to Jesus, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of the Heavenly Father. His words echo those of the prophet Jeremiah, warning of the prophets who fill you with vain hopes, who speak visions of their own minds, who 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, "No disaster will come upon you." The warning from Jesus is what gives St. Paul cause to warn the pastors from the church in Ephesus, "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."

2 Does the wariness of false prophets occupy you like it did Jeremiah, or the Apostle Paul, or the Lord? It's not even en vogue nowadays to suppose that some prophets are true and others are not. It's unwise for those who value their popularity to suggest that some are sheep and some are ravenous wolves. All prophets and preachers, cultural cajolers want you to believe, are teaching and preaching you to the same place, even if they get you there by different routes. But then, Jesus is no popular panderer. His warning about false prophets cares nothing for your popularity, only for your salvation. False prophets are not harmless; their false gospel is destructive to faith like wolves' teeth are destructive to sheep.

3 Some false prophets are easy to identify. The wolf who looks nothing like a sheep, who makes no attempt to clothe himself as a sheep, is little danger to true sheep. The one who refuses to address Jesus as Lord, who does not say "Lord, Lord" to Him who is the Lord, he is little threat to you. You can discern the true prophet from the one who lumps Jesus into a group with all other so-called good teachers. You can distinguish between the fruit of a true prophet and that of a false prophet who does not believe God's Word has any inherent authority. You can determine when a prophet is obviously false who doesn't care about entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

4 But none of those is the false prophet warned about in all three pericopes today. Jesus warns about the false prophet who looks exactly like true prophets, the wolf who is indistinguishable from a sheep by his looks, the one who prophesies in Jesus' name, who casts out demons in Jesus' name, who does mighty works in Jesus' name. Sometimes the false prophet dresses up in the church's vestments just like the true prophets and proclaims words contrary to the Word of God, on matters of

marriage and family, on matters of the holy gift of life, on matters of human sexuality. Sometimes the false prophets quote Scripture just as daftly as anyone else, offering false comfort to despisers of God's Word, "It shall be well with you," and false hope to those ensnared in sin, "No disaster will come upon you." Sometimes the prophets have pulpits that preach to tens of thousands in person and millions over the television, exhorting hearers to believe that God has ordained your best life now, that He intends for you to be healthy, wealthy, and wise. Sometimes the false prophets take the stage at huge concerts on the banks of a big river and call young people forward to ask Jesus into their hearts, to make a decision for Jesus.

5      These prophets are false, but they are not the most dangerous; they're all in circles different from your own. The prophet who already has your confidence, who occupies a pulpit you trust, is a bigger danger, should he teach falsely. Any preaching, even if it makes you feel good, even if it teaches you a better way to live, even if it rouses within you love and praise for God, is false preaching if it does not proclaim Jesus Christ and Him crucified. This danger alone is reason not to let your preachers concoct their own liturgies. He can mess up the sermon, but when the rest of the service is the scripted Word of God, designed to draw you to the altar, it is impervious to his poor preaching. And even false prophets can administer the sacraments rightly, delivering the precious gifts of God to you, even apart from any false prophesying. And yet, the risk of false prophets in your midst is why you ought always pray for faithful preachers, for you and for your children, and why you ought be well versed in Scripture and the catechism, to call to repentance any preacher who preaches falsely.

6 But the preacher who has your confidence and your pulpit is not the most dangerous, should he become a false prophet. No, the most dangerous false prophet is the one who constantly has an audience with you, the one you naturally want to trust more than any other voice, the one who resides within you. This false prophet is your old sinful flesh. No other false prophet would have any ill effect were it not for this wicked Adam, this self-centered Eve, who causes your ears to itch for false preaching. This false prophet points your eyes and your attention to an equally false god: yourself. He proclaims, "God isn't quite as concerned with your actions as he used to be; He knows you won't be perfect, so why even try; He's nice enough to let you into heaven as long as you continue to call Him Lord." This prophet is false. His teeth are as razor sharp as any wolf, wanting nothing more than to devour you, to make you as dead as he is. Repent.

7 Not everyone who calls, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of the Father. The will of the Father is not that you do good works. The false prophets have plenty of works. Nothing you can do helps you at all, not even piously calling upon Jesus as Lord. The will of the Father is to send the Son to take human flesh, to suffer hell in the place of sinful humanity. The will of the Father is that He who knew no sin should become sin for you. It's not what you call Jesus that's the deciding factor; it's what He calls you that matters. It's not the trust you can muster up within yourself; it's the faith that He delivers that matters, the filial trust in Him to forgive your sins, to take your sins and make them His own.

8 That's the will of the Father. And only One has ever done the Father's will perfectly. He has taken your sins and paid for them. And He has delivered to you His

very righteousness. He is the True Prophet. Your old sinful flesh, that false prophet with false hope and false despair, will continue to preach falsely, to whisper sweet nothings to you until the day of your death. But you can learn to trust in the True Prophet instead. Through the waters of Holy Baptism, the True Prophet has called you by name, marked you with His cross, delivered to you His righteousness. When your heart falsely accuses you, falsely condemns you, listen to the True Prophet who defends you from every accusation, who sends men to declare His “I forgive you” audibly to you. When your old sinful flesh falsely brands you an incorrigible sinner, listen to the True Prophet who declares you to be set free from sin. When your old sinful flesh would entice you into sin, listen to the True Prophet who died to deliver you from sin, who says to you, “My righteousness is yours; your sin is mine.”

9 You will know this True Prophet by His fruits. His fruits, His gifts for you, are forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation. These good fruits the True Prophet Jesus Christ bore on the good tree of the cross. And these He gives you today.

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

*Soli Deo Gloria*  
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