

The Thirteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 14, 2016

Prayer of the Day: Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift of grace that we come into your presence and offer true and faithful service. Grant that our worship on earth may always be pleasing to you, and in the life to come give us the fulfillment of what you have promised; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Alleluia! (Hebrews 4:12)

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 23:23-29

Have you noticed it yet? You and I live in what is called a “postmodern” world. What that means is the mindset of our society claims that truth is relative. It means that whatever action, behavior, or attitude feels acceptable to you, then it stands as truth. So, if parents feel that their child did not deserve a “D-minus” on a test, then the parents can tell the teacher that the grade is wrong. The teacher supposedly must accept the parent’s decision as “truth.” If you feel that the speed limit down Old-27 (in Harrison) and McEwan St. (in Clare) should be 50 miles per hour, then the officer who pulls you over for speeding has no reason to write you a ticket (because you felt the speed limit should be higher). If you feel some authority figure is treating you unfairly, then you have a right to disobey and insult them—and even attack them (if you feel it deserves that). If someone feels that a boy wearing a skirt is acceptable, then no one should force so-called boy-clothing on the child. The list can go on and on. (Maybe you know other examples of this postmodern thinking).

The beating heart of postmodern thinking is the claim: “there is no absolute truth.” Things you (individually) feel are right does not mean that I might (personally) feel are right. If something feels right to you, then no one has the right to tell you otherwise (so the thinking goes). So truth becomes relative, that is, it changes from person to person. Postmodern

Jeremiah 23:23-29

²³ “Am I only a God nearby,”
declares the LORD,
“and not a God far away?”

²⁴ Can anyone hide in secret places
so that I cannot see him?”
declares the LORD.

“Do not I fill heaven and earth?”
declares the LORD.

²⁵ “I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, ‘I had a dream! I had a dream!’ ²⁶ How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? ²⁷ They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. ²⁸ Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the LORD. ²⁹ “Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”

thinking is this grandiose idea that we can “all agree to disagree” and everyone should be content with that!

Maybe you already recognize the faultiness of that logic. There is absolute truth; there are certain truths people cannot deny. No one can deny that gravity exists. We can pretend it is not present, but we will still be stuck to the ground.

Perhaps some postmodern thinking strikes a little closer home than you might care to admit. (I can see post-modern thinking flare up in my life). In our gospel reading, Jesus plainly tells you to expect division because of our faith. *“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division... father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law”* ([Luke 12:51, 53](#)). Does something inside of you scream out: “Why division, Jesus? Why can we not ‘agree to disagree’ on some of the things you say?”

You see people in Jeremiah’s day wrestling with that very same question, do you not? Jeremiah warns his fellow countrymen to stay away from idolatry. The nation of Judah is wallowing in cow-god-Baal worship. They are having sex with prostitutes at the towering Ashera pole shrines. They please a god [Molech] by bringing their precious firstborn baby and sacrificing it by throwing alive into a fire.

God is watching these horrific acts! He is not locked up in the temple building; he is near the people. He hears the things they say. God is also far; he fills the entire universe. He sees all things and knows all things— including the thoughts and hidden secrets of the heart.

So God sends Jeremiah with a crystal clear warning of what is going to happen if the people do not turn away from idols. *“People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this great city?’ And the answer will be: ‘Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God and have worshiped and served other gods”* ([Jeremiah 22:8-9](#)). The people are going to get conquered by Babylon! They are going to lose their country! They will lose their houses, money, possessions, family— and lives!

How do the people respond to that message? You have prophets running through the streets, drowning out Jeremiah: *“I had a dream! I had a dream!... The LORD says: You will have peace... No harm will come to you!”* ([Jeremiah 23:17, 25](#)). The prophets felt that Jeremiah was wrong and they believed life would get even better. So, they proclaimed their message as divine truth!

Maybe it leaves you scratching your head and wondering: “Why? Why are these prophets misleading the people and why are the people following such wrong teachings? Can God be any clearer about what he sees and what idolatry earns?” You would be right; God is crystal clear. It means the problem is not with God’s Word.

You know, years ago a pastor sat down with someone who recently visited the congregation he served. During their visit, the guest asked the pastor why the congregation practiced “Close Communion.” So, the pastor pointed to the Bible. He explained that in the Lord’s Supper, Jesus gives his real body and real blood in, with, and under the bread and wine and that Jesus wants believers to already have complete agreement in his teachings. ([1 Corinthians 10:16-17](#)). Since God wants believers to confess their agreement on every teaching in the Bible, the congregation wants to teach the teachings of the Bible before people confess agreement in Holy Communion. The guest responded: “But what would Jesus say?”

The pastor pointed to the Bible: "This is what Jesus has said." The guest replied: "But I do not feel that is what Jesus would say." The problem is not with what God says, is it?

If God's Words are clear, then that leaves us with just one more option. The problem is with what the heart wants to hear. That problem can even spread into the hearts of those who spend time in God's Word! After all, did you catch the identity of the group speaking against Jeremiah? They are prophets. People who have Bibles in their hands. They are not Satanists or cult-leaders. The prophets hold up the Bible and use God's name to teach people! The prophets look innocent; their message looks and sounds authentic. What does God say they are doing? **[They] prophesy the delusions of their own minds.** They are proclaiming messages that they want to hear!

People today still use God's Word to say the things they want to hear. Just last year, a religious leader went on the record to say that God does not care what you believe, he will save everyone— including atheists (people who believe God does not exist)! Even though God clearly says: "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*" ([Mark 16:16](#)), this religious leader said "*God is love*" ([1 John 4:8](#)). He pulled one Bible verse out of context in an attempt to change the way people enter heaven!

That just feels right, does it not? That is what a sinful heart tells us. How often do we use our feelings and emotions in order to determine what God means in his Word! When God says, "*Do not give up meeting together in worship!*" ([Hebrews 10:25](#))" how quick the heart beats: "Yes, but nowhere in the Bible does it say: 'You must be here every Sunday!'" When God says: "*Your life is in my hands!*" ([Psalm 31:15](#)) how our hearts might say, "Yes, but look at all the terminally ill people, the lonely 100-year-olds, and the crippled? Does it just not feel right that God does not want them to suffer? So, why not allow them to take a pill and end the suffering?" When God says: "*Forgive one another because I have forgiven you,*" ([Ephesians 4:32](#)) how our hearts hold grudges because we feel the offender has not suffered enough!

Do you really see what is happening? Our hearts can create things (or truths) it wants to hear. It can then open the Bible and use our feelings to defend our actions!

If we decide to follow what we feel relevant to our lives, we are stepping in the place of God! What we are really doing is shoving the Word off to the side and treating our words with equal authority to God's! If we believe that we can follow our human-made truth instead of what God has so clearly said, then we can be forever separated from God!

If that sounds unsettling, that is because it is. That is why God sends Jeremiah. Jeremiah preaches that sin deserves destruction. Whether people admit it or not, there comes a time when life ends. No one can deny that truth. When death comes, all will be gathered around the judgment throne of God!

Yes, the heart could beat: "Well, that is just your opinion! What makes Jeremiah right and the prophets wrong?" Because God's Word burned away lies and shattered dreams. The lying prophets of Jeremiah's day used God's name and proclaimed "Peace and prosperity!" Still, Babylon crushed the nation in the matter of years. If these prophets really proclaimed God's Word, then their message would have come true. Instead, it was Jeremiah who proved to be the true prophet.

Jeremiah remains the true prophet who calls out to us today. His serious message divides us from following the lies of our hearts. His serious message sets our eyes squarely on Jesus.

He reveals that Jesus has not separated himself from you. In fact, Jesus left heaven to reach you! God sends his only Son to separate you from the wages of your sins. Jesus is the One who is abandoned by the Father on the cross— separated from his love, separated from blessings, separated from prayer! Jesus is separated from God because that is what we deserve. Jesus' heart clung to everything God said. Never once did he make God's Word fit a truth he wanted to hear.

So, Jesus suffers the punishment you and I deserve. Because he does this, you will never be cut off from God. No, not because we choose to ignore the punishment for sin. We are declared innocent of sin because Jesus has separated us from the wages of our sins! With his resurrection from the dead, he announces that you and I will spend eternity with him in heaven!

Look what beats inside your chest now. A heart which has been touched by the love of God! With that love beating inside of us, it means we love everything God says in his Word. **YOU HAVE THE WORD; USE IT FAITHFULLY!**

You are able to judge what is a lie and what is a truth by turning to God's Word. God's Word is clear. So, if you hear a teaching that clearly contradicts what the Bible says, then that teaching has not come from God and the preacher has no right to proclaim such lies in the name of God. If you have questions about something you heard, ask a pastor. Let him take you back to the original Hebrew and Greek language and see the dictionary definition of the word. Take the plain meaning of each word. Put that word into the context of what is being said. (For example, if I were to sing the end of the Flintstone's song: "We'll have a gay old time!" it can mean one of two things, right? You have to know the background of the song in order to understand what I am singing.) Finally, realize what God is saying in the section of the Bible you are reading. Only after seeing the clear, concise message God proclaims to you, then you make applications to your heart.

Yes, you and I will battle the temptation to delve into postmodern thinking. The devil will still ask you: "What do you feel and think what is right?" Your heart will still pull you to make God's Word say what you want to hear.

Yet, the problem is not with God's Word. It is clear. **YOU HAVE THE WORD; USE IT FAITHFULLY.** Use the unchanging Word to burn up lies. Use the always-relevant teachings to shatter deception. Use the Word to focus on the Savior's love for you. Gain clarity for your life. Follow his guidance. Gladly listen to his commands. **YOU HAVE THE WORD; USE IT FAITHFULLY!**