

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity
St. Matthew 7:15-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Grapes and figs and thorns and thistles—these fruits of grace and wrath, holiness and sin: they are marks of right preaching and false teaching. And, so, Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets... You will know them by their fruits.”

Thorns and thistles...what are they? A look at Genesis 3, where God pronounces his judgment for Adam’s sin, reveals that thorns and thistles are a reminder of God’s wrath for sin. As a source of pain and anguish, thorns and thistles are a reminder of humanity’s sinful condition.

Cursed is the ground for your sake;
In toil you shall eat of it
All the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you,
And you shall eat the herb of the field.
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
Till you return to the ground,
For out of it you were taken;
For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17-19)

Curses and pain and toil and sweat were unfamiliar companions while Adam and Eve lived in paradise—in Eden. Since their exile, these were their constant companions. They haunt and linger their descendants to this day, a fact you can attest to.

For, who among you has never scraped a knee or suffered a paper cut? Has anyone here never suffered from a headache or upset stomach? Surely there are some here who have had to have a gall bladder, appendix, or something else removed or operated on; certainly, someone is a cancer survivor or has recovered from a horrible disease. And all have grieved or will have to grieve the death of a loved one. All of this serves as a reminder that you were conceived and born in sin. Death is the wages of sin, and pain and suffering are the currency.

Grapes and figs, on the other hand, are a reminder God’s grace. As much as thorns and thistles serve to remind you of your sinfulness and God’s wrath, grapes and figs serve to remind you of God’s presence and grace. During the Exodus, as God’s people were about to receive the second set of stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, they were told once again that they were being led to a good land that God was giving them. In this land were many good things that would keep His people without want:

[T]he LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. (Deuteronomy 8:7-9)

Now, scientists and nutritionists can tell you about the beneficial content of grapes and figs. They can tell you all about the antioxidant and vitamin contents and their affects on cholesterol or heart conditions or kidney health, and so on. However, seeing as these are two of the many good things God was giving to His people to eat, they are good fruit.

Jesus warns, “Beware of false prophets... You will know them by their fruits.” Simply put, false prophets yield fruit that is thorns and thistles. True prophets yield fruit such as grapes and figs. When a false prophet speaks, his words are worthless; they can only cause curses and pain and suffering and

death. When a true prophet speaks, his words are full of life and salvation.

Take, for example, the preaches of Krishna or Buddha. You know that they do not preach Christ and Him crucified. Oh, they may mention Jesus as some great person. They might call Him a great teacher. They probably refer to Him as a great example. But, they never claim that He is true God, “the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2) In fact, they would scoff at the idea that any man would be divine. To these false prophets, Jesus is little more than a person in history.

Or, mention could be made of the preachers of Islam. They would say more than the preachers mentioned earlier. Yes, they’ll call Jesus a great person. They’ll call Him a great teacher. They’ll even call Him a great example. But, they’ll further proclaim Him to be one of the prophets in their history, a man sent by their god, Allah, the second greatest prophet behind Mohammad, even. In fact, their text calls Him the “Word *from* God,” but calling Him the Word *of* God is punishable by death. It all sounds intriguing, and similar in the ears of so many outside the church and mosque, to the point that there are some who say that Christians and Muslims worship the same god (so it shouldn’t matter what he’s called or what you’re called).

In both cases, these preachers are false prophets. Their words result in nothing but thorns and thistles. Their preaching does nothing to save people. On the contrary, it leads to death and hell. Where Christ crucified is not preached, He is not there to save. If He is not there to save, people are left to their own devices and without hope. Nothing and no one can save except Christ; and He has done so through the cross. And He continues to give His gifts in right preaching and in the administration of His gifts, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion—good fruits.

There is another danger to mention. I’m reminded of our second home in Oregon. Near the entrance, there were several bushes. From a distance, they looked fine; they look like ordinary bushes. I couldn’t tell you what kind they are, but they were ordinary looking, posing no danger as far I could tell. But I can tell you this: when you took a closer look at some of them, you would have seen a second plant growing within. This second plant has thorns. It was hidden well in the bush, so well that you wouldn’t have known that it was there at first glance.

I use this to illustrate this point: There are preachers out there who claim to preach Christ, but their fruit tells otherwise. Outwardly, they look like those ordinary bushes; inwardly, they conceal stalks of thorns. Outwardly, these preachers look like they belong to the Church, but the Christ they preach is not the true God. While they claim to be Christian or bear His name and title in other ways, it is not Christ they really preach.

They may add a Christ to a list of gods—make Him one path among many. They may proclaim Him as a great example to live up to. Some of them add to His teaching, teaching that what He has revealed as His instructions is incomplete. They’ll say Jesus is good and everything, but you still need to earn God’s favor and salvation. Or, they may go in the other direction and teach that all you need is to believe in Jesus; you can leave the little details and doctrine to trained theologians, and so never know who this Jesus is that you believe in—and if that’s the case, then your Jesus can be whomever you make him out to be.

In every case, these preachers deny the Gospel. If Jesus’ death and resurrection is not proclaimed as the way to forgiveness, life, and salvation—the **only** way—then the Gospel is denied, because that is the Gospel!

Those thorns growing within an ordinary bush illustrate another point, as well: Thorns and thistles can be found among the true Church...not within, but among. In those places that do proclaim the Truth, that do preach Christ and Him crucified, can be found those who deny it and those who

refuse to believe it. They are not part of the true, invisible Church; they occupy a place in the visible Church.

Beware, dear hearers, those preachers that are like ordinary bushes that conceal thorny stalks can be found even among those who outwardly share your confession, who claim to be a part of this Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. There are many examples of this throughout history, but the one which most easily come to mind these days are the events at a New York baseball stadium in 2001.

These are wolves in sheep's clothing. And therein lies a point. These false prophets and false believers most likely believe they are believing and proclaiming the truth. I have heard it said, "No one ever wakes up in the morning and says, 'I'm going to be a false prophet!'" In fact, in a church history course, a seminary professor of mine once said, "All heresies were taught with the best of intentions." Of course, we have no doubt heard it said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Here lies the warning. Look at the rose bush. The flower is beautiful and bears a sweet aroma. It is one of the most appealing flowers in God's creation. But the plant also bears thorns. The false prophet may gather around himself a large following. He may have a beautiful personality and a sweet charisma. He can amaze and wow with a litany of good works and perhaps even miracles. His message may even be logically appealing—things like earning God's favor make sense, as if His favor was the reward for doing good works. Like the rose bush, though, his personality and works are as the flower, but his message is as the rest of the bush: full of thorns.

No matter how appealing these false prophets are, the fruit of their message is death—for them and for those who follow them.

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

Those who produced thorns and thistles, even if doing so in Jesus' name, are unknown by Him. Their good works and miracles were done in denial of God's grace in His Son. If Jesus doesn't know you, then your place is the lake of fire with Satan and his minions. (cf. Matthew 25:41-46)

You learn to judge a prophet's fruit, a preacher's words, by the Word. It is the Word you hear proclaimed here. It is the Word you have opportunity to study as it is taught here. It is the Word you read and study at home. It is the Word which tells you of your Savior and of His work for you. It is the Word which strengthens your faith. It is the Word of God which serves as the measuring stick by which a preacher's words are judged, including mine.

"Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?" No, if you want grapes, you go to a grapevine. If you want figs, you go to a fig tree. If you want good fruit, you go to a good tree.

Friends in Christ, there is one good tree which bore the best fruit ever given to mankind. It is the tree of Calvary. On that tree, the blood of God was shed for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. God in Jesus Christ died on that tree so that we could receive life; the tree of Calvary is the new tree of life.

There are no thorns and thistles on this tree, spare the crown of thorns which adorn your Savior's brow. Those thorns show you that your sins and the sins of the world are borne on the cross by Christ. They are there to show you that the weight of this world's curse and pain and toil and sweat are now upon Jesus as He hangs on the tree. They are there to show you that the fullness of God's wrath is thrust upon His Son as He is nailed to the tree. And if the fullness of God's wrath is thrust upon His Son, then there is none left for you.

On the cross, God took the lifelessness of your thorns and thistles, transferred them to His Son, and exchanged them for the grapes and figs of His grace. On the cross, God in Christ died the death you deserved, and exchanged it for His eternal life. He did this for all, including the false prophets, that they may turn from their error and trust in Him.

While not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, the other side of that statement is that there are some who say, "Lord, Lord," who will. There are those who say, "Lord, Lord," who deny the Gospel and God's grace, but there are also those who say, "Lord, Lord," who do the will of the Father in heaven. What is this will of God? In John 6, Jesus answers, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (John 6:29) This is a faith taught in and received from the Word of God, for it is written, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God..." (Ephesians 2:8) Faith is a gift of God; they are grapes and figs, dear friends!

What wonderful fruit, these grapes and figs. They are fruit won for you and for all on the tree of the cross. You should take this personally. On the cross, Christ was crucified *for you*. From the cross, good fruit is given *to you*, faith and life. Look at the cross of Christ, you faithful, for from it these fruitful words are uttered *to you*: you are forgiven for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.