

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)
St. Matthew 10:5a, 21-33

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

I'll begin with a remark by Martin Luther, condemned by the church for proclaiming that people are saved by grace through faith alone on account of Christ. Luther once expressed that, even when he was thoroughly intimidated by his enemies, he could not stop preaching the Gospel: He would envision the Jesus on Judgment Day asking him, "Why were you more afraid of them than me?" He may well have had today's Gospel in mind.

Jesus was sending His disciples out into the world to preach a specific message: "Repent! The kingdom of heaven is at hand." As they did so, they would work miracles and wonders. That is the good part, but Jesus also pulled no punches: they would also face heavy opposition.

They would be rejected—sometimes by households, sometimes by whole towns...sometimes by family members, sometimes by close friends, and sometimes by the heads of state and church. "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves," He had just told them (as you may recall from last week). Then He explained what He meant in today's text, a continuation of last week: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master...If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household."

As things turned out, it is no less than the Pharisees and Scribes who call Jesus "Beelzebul," the "lord of the flies" as it is commonly translated. And if those church leaders—who could do no wrong in the eyes of the people—called Jesus such, they would consider his followers gnats to be swatted. The disciples would face some terrible intimidation for telling the Good News about Jesus. The intimidation was no excuse, however. The disciples were not to remain silent. "So have no fear of them," Jesus commanded.

For one thing, they didn't have to fear because, "[N]othing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." The enemies of Jesus may look to have the strong hand; after all, what is a teacher and twelve men against the world? However, the disciples knew the end of the story because Jesus told it to them: He will be the Victor, and He will return in glory to judge all nations and condemn those who reject Him. Therefore, the disciples shouldn't have been intimidated—in this battle of good vs. evil, evil will appear to have the upper hand for some time to come, but the disciples knew the end of the story, and it would be foolish to side with those who will lose in the end.

If they were intimidated, it is no excuse. They were not to remain silent, and they had no right to change the message that was given to them. They were to preach that the people should repent; the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

"Do not fear," the Jesus said again, and this time He was even more specific. "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." The disciples would suffer at the hands of sinners, this is certain; but those evildoers can only kill the body. God, the Father Almighty, wields a much bigger sword: He can send body and soul to hell for eternity. Who is to be feared more?

Which brings me back to Luther's nightmare of Judgment Day: an angry God slaying him with divine eyes and saying, "Why were you more afraid of them than me?"

For the Church today, it is the same proposition. The Lord calls His people to proclaim what He tells them: His Law in all of its severity, and His Gospel in all of its sweetness. As an individual Christian, you will face such intimidation: when confronted with a crisis where the righteous decision means

suffering, will you do what is right or take the easy way out? When a family member or close friend chooses a sinful way of life, will you lovingly speak the truth and risk hostility, or keep silent to maintain the family peace? From the school locker room to the business office, in every walk of life, there will be constant attempts to turn you from what is good and pure and holy to what is wrong and impure and most unholy.

As individual Christians face such intimidation, congregations are also confronted with the same. There are those who say that the Church must alter its message to survive. The change must come in order to bring more people into the pews, and that usually means sounding more loving and accepting and affirming (as the world defines those terms) and less condemning of sin. The change must come because this is not your grandfather's America; times change, and so must the church. The change must come, they say, though it is usually put in soft and attractive terms—you're not supposed to abandon the Gospel, of course; of course believe that Jesus is the Savior. The Church just need to soften up on the Law. Instead of denouncing immorality as evil, conduct further studies. Instead of disciplining manifest sinners, affirmatively bear with them and their sin than risk offending them. Instead of preaching that the Law condemns all, preach it so that it sounds like a helpful tool for living, and nothing more ruinous than that.

Sadly, congregations face this intimidation not only from the outside world, but also from their members! Sadly, many congregations have fallen to this temptation and have considered it right and orthodox—what is normal and has always been done—for many years.

So goes the pressure on the Church today. It is not new; in fact, Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, recognized this nearly 150 years ago. To students at the seminary, he declared:

Now, there is no doubt that these men wish to convert people by using such false terms. They believe that they can convert men by concealing things from them or by presenting matters in a manner that is pleasing to people in their natural state. They are like sorry doctors who do not like to prescribe a bitter medicine to weak patients, or if they do prescribe it, they add so much sugar to it that the patient does not taste the bitter medicine, with the result that its effect is spoiled. Accordingly, preachers who do not clearly and plainly proclaim the Gospel, which is offensive to the world, are not faithful in carrying out their ministry. Rather, they cause great injury to people's souls. Instead of advancing Christians in the knowledge of the pure doctrine, they allow them to search about in the dark, nurse hallucinations, and hurtle down their false and dangerous path. (Law & Gospel, 26th Evening Lecture; May 1, 1885)

It is a matter of faith to believe that the Church continues by the pure preaching of God's Law and Gospel; so Christians live by faith. When (not if) the temptation comes to alter the message, make no mistake about it, it's temptation to sin. And with any temptation to sin, God lashes you with His Law for your good, to show you the sin and the death that awaits. He demands that His Church proclaims His Word. And He asks this damning question: "Why do you fear them more than me?"

After all, from the Word of the Lord you know the end of the story. There is only One who sits on the judgment seat and determines your fate forever. He wields the larger sword of eternal life or death. Why would you fear anyone else more than Him?

Now, let me pause here and be clear: so far in this sermon, the Law is being preached—God's unrelenting, unforgiving Law. This is the Law that Jesus preached in this Gospel lesson. Fear God and

obey His commandments, even when opposed and intimidated by men, because He can destroy your body and soul in hell.

This is the Law of God, and it is perfectly true; however, I hasten to add that it is only half of the story. The chief purpose of the Law is to show you your sin, for you sin and break His Law every single day. Whenever you sin, your love of sin overcomes your fear of God and His punishment. Whenever you fail clearly to proclaim His Word, you fear something else besides His wrath.

God gives His Law to show you your sin; however, He does so for your good. When you see your sin, you know you cannot save yourself. When you know you cannot save yourself, you are ready to hear of a Savior. The Law is half the story; now I turn to the other half of the story: the Gospel. Dear penitent people of God, prepare to be forgiven.

How sad it would be if the message of Christianity was only one of fear, of, "Obey God because He carries the biggest stick." But this is not the case. You do not trust the Lord because no one is more fearful. No, you trust in Him because no one loves you more.

Listen again to these words of Jesus, from the text: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household." Ponder these words for a moment: When this Teacher sent out His disciples, He wasn't some spoiled ruler who demanded that they suffer so that He didn't have to. When this Master sent out His servant, He didn't demand their death so He could live. He told them they will suffer just as He has and would suffer. A servant is not above his Master; if the Master suffers, the servant will suffer, too. But the Master is greater—so, His suffering is greater as well...far greater!

For those disciples, and for you, this Master suffered. At the hand of supposedly righteous men, He was arrested. He was falsely accused of all sorts of sins of which He was not guilty—but you and I are. He accepted them in silence, and allowed Himself to be beaten and scourged. He was hung on a cross, where supposedly good men mocked Him and ridiculed Him. But this was only a little bit of His suffering. The greater portion did not come from supposedly righteous men, but from His own Father in heaven—His Father who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. The Son did not deserve this destruction, for He has not sinned. You and I deserve this punishment, for you and I constantly sin against God. But there at the cross, the Master took the place of His servants—He suffered hell for your sins. God the Father destroyed His Son to fulfill the Law, to inflict punishment your and my sins have merited. But here is your salvation: God destroyed His Son so that He may forgive you instead.

Consider, then, these words of Jesus from the Gospel today: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." God the Father keeps track of sparrows, purchased at a penny a pair; He knows when one of them falls to the ground. Dear Christians, here is your comfort: You have not been purchased cheaply for a penny. No, you have been redeemed—not with silver or gold, but Jesus' holy precious blood, and His innocent suffering and death. He has purchased you in this way that you may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. This is most certainly true.

And so, you have God's Law and Gospel in this text this morning. You are faithfully to proclaim His Word. If you fail to do so—no, no...when you fail to do so—you sin and deserve His eternal, unforgiving wrath. However, as you proclaim His Word, you also hear this sweet sound: Your sins are forgiven, because Jesus has suffered God's wrath for you at the cross.

The Law says, "Obey God out of fear. If you do not obey Him, but deny Him, Jesus will deny you before His Father in heaven." The Gospel says, "Jesus has redeemed you with His holy and precious blood. Therefore, you are set free to confess Him—out of thankfulness, not fear—confident that He will confess you before His Father in heaven."

Or, to paraphrase Luther a little... When tempted to cave in to the intimidation of his enemies, Luther envisioned an angry God speaking Law: "Why did you fear them more than me?" However, instead of such an unforgiving accusation, the Lord in His Gospel presents this gentle coaxing: "Has anyone else died for you, to take away your sins? Has anyone else shed holy, precious blood and endured bitter suffering and death that you may be his own forever? I have, and I forgive you and give you eternal life."

This is the Law and Gospel of the text this morning, and so I conclude with one more oft-repeated Luther quote: "We should fear and love God," the beginning to each explanation of a commandment in the Small Catechism. Do you fear God? Yes, you rightly fear the consequences of breaking His commands and suffering His wrath. This is a godly fear, which moves one to sorrow for sins. But all the more, you love God because of your redemption. He has punished His Son, destroyed Him, in your place—He has judged the Son who kept His commandments because of your failure to do the same. The price has been paid, a price far greater than that for sparrows. Because that price has been paid, you can be certain of this: You are forgiven for all of your sins.

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