

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 23:1-6

There is something unpleasant about it, is there not, when a preacher is preaching primarily about the preaching of others, and how wrong they are.

I think Lutheran Pastors in particular have a bad reputation in this regard; not so much because of the way most of us actually preach, I suspect, but rather because of the way it is *assumed* that we preach, and the way our preaching is *perceived*, because of the reputation we Lutherans have for being concerned with *doctrine*. The general sentiment in Christendom over the last half century or so has been that we should *love* each other, and that this means to *not* be concerned with doctrine. We should focus on what we have in common and pay no attention to that which divides us, whatever it may be; even if it is the Truth of God that divides us.

Our Lord Jesus, on the other hand, in His prayer to His heavenly Father, and ours, made it clear that His will for those who would come to believe in Him is for us to be united in a common faith and testimony to *the Truth*, rather than that His Church and His Christians be indifferent to what is *the Truth* and what is not; and what is His Truth, and what is not, that is what *doctrine* is.

I do not pray for these alone, He said in His prayer, that is: not only for the Apostles, but also for those who will believe in me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in You; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that You sent me. And the glory which You gave me I have given them, that they may be one, just as we are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

Our Lord Jesus, Son of God, made Himself one with us, born into our kind, and baptised into our sin, that we might be made one with Him, as He is one with the Father, by Baptism, and by having His body and blood given to us, for real, to eat and drink, in His festive meal of salvation. This is the Word which He sent His Apostles to the world and set His Church in the world to proclaim; it is by that Word unbelievers come to believe in Him, and it is in this Truth that He wills for His Church and His Christians to be one with Him, and with the Father, and with one another, united in a common faith and testimony to His Truth, that the world may know and believe Him as He really is.

Therefore He commands His Church, and His servants, and hers, to proclaim the Truth against all falsehood and distortion of His Truth; and this includes pointing out, not so much how wrong they are. who preach and believe differently, but rather exactly *how* it is that they are wrong.

Most of us do not actually enjoy doing this; from my experience, most of us do not. To some of us it is unpleasant in itself. And some of us are concerned that it might come off as if what we are doing is trying to make ourselves look better than others, or promoting our own particular Lutheran peculiarities; which, of course, is also a temptation for some of us. At any rate, my impression is that most of us do not enjoy preaching against others; when we do so, we do so because we know it to be our duty to warn those entrusted to our care against embracing false teachings. And because the falsehood of false teachings so often is not obvious, it must be explained how and why the false teachings are false, and how they will lead those who embrace them away from the true faith and obedience we owe to God, and might perhaps ultimately make them to lose sight of God Himself, as He really is, and lose sight of His salvation.

In this regard, God Himself is rather blunt and straightforward. He had His holy Apostle Paul write: *Even if we ourselves or an angel from Heaven preach to you any other gospel than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.* And He even had him repeat it: *As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches to you any other gospel than what you have received, let him be accursed.*

Today we hear it: *"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!" says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed my people: "You have scattered my flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings," says the Lord.*

The Truth must always, by its very nature, militate against falsehood; because falsehood, by its very nature, militates against the Truth, all falsehood. Not to tend to the flock with the Truth of God is not only *not* to lead them to our Lord Jesus, but also to actually lead them away from Him. For away from Him is where sinners will go, left to our own devices; we are always on our way away from Him, and will go off on our way away, if His Word is not spoken to us and allowed to draw us back into His love. Again, it is by the Word of God, as He has entrusted it to His Church, that we believe in Him.

And by that Word God Himself tends to His flock as a shepherd.

As we also hear it today: *I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.* He would bring His people back from Babylon, back from where He was about to drive them, at the time when He spoke what we hear Him speaking today, into exile and captivity because of the ungodly idolatry into which they had been led by false preachers and shepherds.

His people would be taken into exile and captivity as an illustration and imagery of how the whole human race has been cast out from the glorious presence of God because our first parents submitted themselves to servitude under Satan, and because we ourselves join them, each and every one of us, in submitting to his servitude by our own sin, born as we are in slavery to sin, without the fear and knowledge of God, and with all sorts of evil desires in us, and a nature that is hostile to God and will not submit to His love.

But God would have mercy upon His people; this promise He proclaimed already before the punishment. *I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries where I have driven them, as we hear it today, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.*

And this, also, was an illustration and imagery of how God would deal with all of fallen Mankind. As we also hear it: "*Behold, the days are coming,*" says the Lord, "*when I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgement and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; Now this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord our Righteousness.*"

The Lord God, who is Himself the Shepherd of His people, would come into the world for the salvation of sinners; the Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity would have Himself born into our kind to live for us, in our stead and on our behalf, the life we all owe it to God to live, in full and complete love and trust and obedience and submission to His will. And He who is from eternity the Holy One of God, in whom is no sin, no evil, He had Himself baptised with us sinners, and baptised into our sin, to take it upon Himself and bear it for us, He who shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His own judgement against it, His righteous wrath against all wrong and wrongdoing, His holy hatred of evil. He who had been raised up as a Branch of righteousness was raised up upon the tree of shame, crucified and cursed for us, for the sin of all sinners.

Him who knew of no sin God made to be sin for us, as He had His holy Apostle Paul write it, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Or as we hear it today: Now, this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord our Righteousness.

He is Himself our righteousness. He has lived for us the life that we owe it to God to live; and He has suffered for us the death we have earned by our failure to live that life ourselves. All that we owe to God He has presented to Him, in our stead and on our behalf. And we are right with Him, and righteous before His judgement. We are pure and perfect and precious in His sight. For He who had Himself baptised into us and made one with us now has sinners baptised into Himself and made one with Him in all that is His.

This is the promise He has set His Church in the world to proclaim, and with which He has entrusted it to His servants, and hers, to feed her. As we also hear it today: *"I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking," so says the Lord.*

We have nothing to fear, no reason to be dismayed, for when His love is upon us we can lack nothing. We are righteous and right with God. And our righteousness is full and complete. He Himself is our righteousness. As such, our salvation is full and complete, and there is nothing lacking, nothing left for us to do, other than to hear His Word of salvation, which presents His salvation to us as full and complete, and which is, therefore, His promise of salvation, with which His salvation is actually given to us, fully and completely and for real, and to all who hear His promise and take it to heart.

It is with this Word He sets Pastors, or *shepherds*, as the Latin word *pastor* means, to feed His Church: His Word of salvation, which sets His salvation before us as full and complete, and with which His salvation is actually given to us, fully and for real. By this His Word of His love and what His love has done for us, He will have the hearts of His Christians bound, so that we live in His love, in His Word and worship, and serve Him in holiness and righteousness all our days.

And against anything and everything that would lead us away from the true faith and obedience to Him He will have His Christians warned, lest we lose sight of Him and His love; because of His love, which is the greatest of all.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.