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Isaiah 44:6-8, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Bearing with the Heretic

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’
²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.’ (Matthew 13:28-29, NRSV)

In my opinion, today’s Gospel Lesson invites us to ponder a sad reality: I mean that, on this here side of God’s Kingdom, any of us can be wrong about the Word of God. And in being wrong about God’s Word, we are being wrong about the chief thing in the Church, thereby exposing both ourselves and our neighbors to harm.

What is the true “holy thing” that makes the Sabbath Day holy? Answer: the Word of God -- the one Word we want and need to get right:

The Word of God is the true holy thing above all holy things. Indeed, it is the only one we Christians acknowledge and have. Though we had the bones of all the saints or all the holy and consecrated vestments gathered together in one heap, they could not help us in the slightest degree, for they are all dead things that can sanctify no one. But God’s Word is the treasure that sanctifies all things. (Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, the Third Commandment, Tappert Edition)

What is the fundamental error that renders us guilty before the Second Commandment? What is at the heart of that great sin called “taking the name of the Lord in vain”? Answer, saying “Thus saith the Lord”, when the Lord has not said so. Again, listen to Luther on this:

...what this commandment forbids is appealing to God’s name falsely or taking his name upon our lips when our heart knows or should know that the facts are otherwise... The greatest abuse, however, occurs in spiritual matters, which pertain to the conscience, when false preachers arise and peddle their lying nonsense as the Word of God. (Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, the Second Commandment, Tappert Edition)

A few weeks back, on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, I mentioned in the sermon how appalled I was at the prophet Hananiah. That man contradicted the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah preached that the Lord wanted Judah to submit to the

rule of King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. To dramatize his preaching, Jeremiah had done what the Lord had commanded him to do: he fashioned himself a wooden yoke, put it upon his shoulders as if he were an oxen, and went around preaching to the people, begging them to submit to the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar:

“Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live.” (Jeremiah 27:12, KJV)

But the prophet Hananiah also claimed to have a word from the Lord, only his word was contrary to Jeremiah’s. Hananiah preached that Babylon was on her last legs and that Judah could look to throw off Babylon’s dominion. To dramatize his preaching, Hananiah removed Jeremiah’s yoke, dashed it to the ground, and broke it.

What Hananiah did is amazing to me. For me, it is stunning to imagine the self-confidence and gusto with which Hananiah claimed to have the Word of God when he did not! He seems to have been preaching not the Word of God, but rather what he *thought* the Word of God *ought* to be. And that is a very different thing from humbly preaching the Word.

Alas, we poor human beings are capable of getting the most important matters wrong! Heretics are not spies. They are not deceivers. They do not have evil intentions. But they risk doing harm both to themselves to their neighbors by getting the Word of God wrong.

Last Sunday we considered our Lord’s parable of the sower and the seeds, noting that three parts perish, but one part flourishes, “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” Now, we consider this part that flourishes. It turns out that it too is threatened. It is beset by what St. John Chrysostom calls “the societies of the heretics.”¹

So, this is a sermon about the heretics. I call the sermon “Bearing with the Heretics.” Professor Eric Gritsch, my old Reformation Church History professor, used to quote a saying that might go back to Luther: “Where God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel.” As Dr. Gritsch used to put it, “Any self-respecting devil will want to be where the action is, and the action is in the church!” So, the society of heretics has long mingled with the society of the saints. Our state of affairs is that we poor human beings are capable of being wrong about the Word of God. And when we are wrong, we become the tares amidst the wheat. What, then, is to be done? I hope we can find some guidance about these things from Jesus in this morning’s Bible readings.

ISAIAH 44

Let me begin with our First Lesson, from Isaiah 44. I want to begin here because this text reminds us that the Lord is in charge of his Church. He will take

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. Matthew*, Homily XLVI.

charge of the harvest, he will sort out the wheat from the tares, he will make sure that his Word prevails and saves us. Our part is not to worry so much about the outcome of things, but rather to tend to the meanwhile, to our brothers and sisters in the Lord here and now, even if, from time to time, any of us might be wrong about the Word of God.

The Lord, the God of Abraham and of the Church, hurls this challenge to the religious world:

Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any. (Isaiah 44:8, RSV)

What would be arrogant and foolhardy in a human being, an angel, or another god is simple wisdom and truth in the mouth of the God of Israel and of the Church. To address the universe and all of reality with the question, "Is there a God besides me?" could be dangerous indeed if there were another God who could answer back, "Here I am! I am the Rock. I am the very Rock of Ages. Besides me there is no other!" Prometheus, for example, might proudly declare that he refuses to acknowledge Zeus, but if Prometheus despises, not Zeus, but the God of Abraham and of the Church, then he is going to get his comeuppance someday.

Let the challenge of our God hail through all eternity! He does not fear rebuke from some other god, for there is none. That is the point of this Isaiah passage. At the start of our short reading, the Lord identifies himself as Israel's Redeemer:

⁶Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. (Isaiah 44:6, RSV)

But the Lord could hardly comfort captive Israel if there were some other god who could overturn his saving plans.

The Babylonian masters have their own gods. Naturally they do. And the Babylonians are probably pretty proud of their own gods. After all, are not the Babylonians conquerors of the world, including that wee nation Israel? And yet the God of Israel is unimpressed. He simply denies that the gods of Babylon are true at all.

So far, I have been speaking as if this is a matter merely of truth and logic: The LORD denies the existence of other gods because he *is* God, and they aren't. But there is better news than even this. The Lord's denial of the other gods is not simply a matter of how things are. More than that, it is a matter of how the Lord shall make things *to be* -- aye, how he shall make them to be even if he must die to make them so. When the Lord says to his people that he is their Redeemer, he means to make it so. Whatever the cost to himself, his love for his people is such that he is determined to be their Redeemer. So, if there are any other gods, they are just going to have to get out of the way.

How can the Lord be so confident about the other gods? What contest can he pose that will demonstrate that he is right and they are wrong? How can he persuade downhearted Israel captive in Babylon that he is the one and only God? The answer is in this short passage from Isaiah 44. The answer concerns the future:

⁷Who is like me? Let him proclaim it, let him declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us *what is yet to be*. (Isaiah 44:7, RSV)

Just as the God of Israel could part the Red Sea in order that captive Israel should have a future, so can he confidently speak of Israel's salvation even in the midst of Babylonia captivity. For, you see, our God is not just a *predictor* of the future; he is the *fashioner* of it.

THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE WEEDS

This brings us to today's parable about the wheat and the weeds. The instruction of the householder to the slaves has a double time reference: to both the harvest to come and to the meanwhile, to what is to be done now. When the harvest comes, the household will send reapers to gather the wheat and to discard the weeds. Meanwhile, the slaves are to let the wheat and the weeds grow together.

The householder desires to protect the wheat. He does not want the wheat to be uprooted along with the weeds. I should think that the parallel to life in the church is that the Lord of the church does not want the saints to be harmed by the uprooting of the heretics. Christ is content that they live side by side for now.

This is a kind of mercy on the saints, for some of the heretics are our own brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, and folks dear to us. We might view them as misguided, and if they are heretics, they are indeed wrong. Yet it could break our hearts if they were somehow expelled from the church. Some Christians would incline to echo the great line of Ruth regarding her mother-in-law, Naomi:

...for whither thou goest, I will go; (Ruth 1:6, KJV)

Likewise, the expulsion of the heretics could break many a heart and uproot some of the saints in the process.

But there is another kind of mercy in the household's instructions: mercy on the tares. In this divine agriculture, weeds are capable of becoming wheat. As Chrysostom puts it:

...of the very tares it is likely that many may change and become wheat. If therefore ye root them up beforehand, ye injure that which is to

become wheat, slaying some, in whom there is yet room for change and improvement.²

It is the part of the Lord of the Church to fashion the future. Just as the LORD could comfort captive Israel by declaring that their salvation is in his hands and that there are no other gods who can stop him from accomplishing his saving purposes, so this same Lord can say to the Church something like this:

Do not be troubled overmuch by the heretics. I will sort these things out in the end. My part is to preserve the Church and I will do it. Indeed, I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Your part meanwhile is to do what you can to change the weeds into wheat. You are to strive for this miracle. And I will be with you in your striving.

Now, heresy is a terrible thing. How can a pastor not tremble to hear the solemn judgment of Jesus on the false shepherd:

...but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6, RSV)

The souls seated on the pews of our churches are precious - every one of them - but the heretic is soul-destroying. Health, happiness, hopes and dreams are all at stake in the claims of the heretic. The years entrusted to us on this old earth -- our threescore and ten years, or, by virtue of strength, our fourscore years or even more -- they are all at risk by the teaching of the heretic. The intentions of the heretic might be honorable. Certainly they are. The heretic believes with all his or her heart in the Gospel, the Bible, and the Spirit, yet the power of the heretic in the life of the saints is to tempt them astray. That is inevitably the consequence of the false shepherd. The false shepherd does not increase life, but diminishes it.

It would be nice if the church were pure, only it seems not to be the will of the Householder. Where Christ builds a church, Satan might indeed build a chapel, yet the Lord of the Church wants only good to come to the heretic. Indeed, the Lord wants the tare to become wheat.

If, then, it should seem to us that in our congregations or in our denominations, there should seem to be heretics threatening the flock, then has appeared the most perfect occasion for that great apostolic exhortation about “speaking the truth in love”:

¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined

² Ibid.

and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16, RSV)

OF COURSE THIS WOULD BE THE STANCE OF THE LANDOWNER!

For in the end, the Landowner is Jesus, and did he not bear with the misguided in his little community, even with a traitor and betrayer -- aye and bore with them all the way through the Cross?

To be part of the church is go along on a journey from the lesser to the greater, from the things of earth to the things of heaven, from a field with a mixture of wheat and tares to a kingdom in which the Lord of all sorts things out and sets them in right order. He is the rock, there is no other, and none can stop him from his kingdom. Our part is to try to lose no one along the way, not even the tare, but that all should come into a unity of truth and affection, to the glory of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.