

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10A)

July 16, 2017

Text: Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The so-called “Battle for the Bible” in the LCMS took place in the 1970’s. It was a difficult time in our church. As I understand the history, there were leading lights in the Missouri Synod who were introducing different and unfaithful ways of reading and interpreting the Bible. The methodology that was being advocated is called higher criticism. Higher criticism basically says the Bible is an ancient document that should be read and interpreted as any other human document, just like Homer’s Illiad and Odyssey, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Enuma Elis, or for that matter, like today’s newspaper. Higher Criticism assumes the supernatural did not and does not happen. So, Jonah could not have been swallowed by a great fish, the universe could not have been spoken into existence out of nothing, axe heads don’t float on water, and yes, Jesus didn’t heal the sick, raise the dead, or for that matter, rise from the dead Himself. Those are mythic stories written to explain spiritual lessons and encourage moral living.

Well, hopefully you can see the demonic danger of such a teaching. Ultimately, in higher criticism, man is the supreme judge as to how the Bible should be read and applied. It is not without reason that the denominations who are embracing various redefinitions of marriage, of man, who hold to various forms of evolution, or who are willing to change long-standing teachings within Christianity, including the possibility of miracles and Jesus’ physical resurrection from the dead, are the same ones who adopted higher criticism.

Under God’s grace, the Missouri Synod rejected the teaching of higher criticism. One author wrote that the LCMS is the only Christian denomination to have started down that path of higher criticism, rejected it, and returned to an orthodox confession of faith in God’s holy Word. To this day, we joyfully and boldly confess that the Bible is the Word of God, inspired, inerrant, true in all its parts. It can be trusted and believed; the Bible is the only divine, authoritative source for Christian doctrine and piety.

But I wonder if we, in our Church, aren't facing another battle over the Bible. The storm centers around the efficacy and sufficiency of God's Word. In other words, is the Bible enough, sufficient for the life of the Church, or must we use sources of authority other than the Bible? I have visited churches in denominations who will adamantly state that they believe the Bible to be God's true, infallible Word. But then they preach sermons and give Bible studies that are watered down forms of secular psychology and sociology. Is the Bible enough for the worship of the Church? Denominations and churches who ardently confess the Bible to be God's Word will at the same time introduce forms of worship that are utterly foreign to the Biblical idea of singing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, that enrich the hearts, minds, and imagination of the worshippers with God's Word. More examples could be given.

Listen again to Isaiah 55:10–11. Be alert to how God's Word is described:

<sup>10</sup>“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, <sup>11</sup>so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

God's Word goes forth, says the Lord through His prophet, and it unfailingly accomplishes everything God desires it to do. It never returns empty. Every sermon that preaches God's Word in its truth and purity accomplishes God's purposes. Every Bible study is successful. Every Biblical devotion you have in your home succeeds in doing God's will. That is why the Christian Church has always encouraged her members to be faithful in Church, that is, to be faithful in hearing God's Word given in hymns, readings, sermons, and received tangibly in the sacraments of baptism, holy absolution, and the Lord's Supper.

It is also why I encourage and exhort families to read God's Word together and prayer with one another. Husbands and fathers, the spiritual head of your respective homes, lead your family in the hearing of God's Word in your homes mingled with prayer. Wives and mothers, encourage and support your husbands in this noble task. Children and grandchildren, ask for your parents and grandparents to read the Bible and pray with you. The reason for all such devotion is the promise given here today, “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

God's Word is living, powerful, sufficient, and effective to accomplish all that God's desires to work in your lives. Immerse yourself in the reading and hearing of God's Word. And absolutely demand of me, your pastor, to preach it faithfully, joyfully, and confidently in all its fullness.

And yet there is another aspect we must consider regarding God's Word. On the one hand, God's Word is effective and sufficient. It will accomplish the task for which God the Father sends it. That's the divine perspective. But we must also give attention to the human perspective; that is, how do we hear God's Word. Our Lord's parable in Matthew 13, today's gospel reading, is most illuminating in teaching us how we sinful human beings hear God's Word.

The Lord Jesus teaches us that He, the sower of God's Word through the lives of His people and the ministry of His Church, shares the divine Word of the kingdom graciously and freely to everyone without reservation. Those who hear God's Word are compared to 4 different types of soil in which the seed of God's Word is planted. The 4 soils represent 4 types of hearing God's Word.

The first type of hearing God's Word is represented by the seed sown on along the path. This person hears God's Word but doesn't understand it. Jesus rather graphically describes the devil as snatching away the seeds of God's Word. In other words, there is a battle for the hearts and minds of people. Faith and understanding aren't allowed to grow and produce fruit unto salvation.

The second type of hearing is represented by the seed that falls on the rocky ground. This person hears, understands, and believes the good news of Christ's kingdom. But when things get tough, whether from the constant struggle against sin and temptation or the rejection they experience because of Jesus, their faith dries up and dies. The good seed doesn't continue to produce fruit unto salvation.

The third type of hearing is represented by the seed falling on ground infested with thorns. The seed initially takes root and begins to grow. But the weeds of worldly cares and the desire for earthly riches suffocates the good seed of God's kingdom. Faith is choked to death by unbelief and sin. The good seed can't produce fruit unto salvation.

The fourth type of hearing is represented by the seed falling on good ground. This person hears, understands, and believes the Word of Christ's kingdom. The seed

produces a goodly crop, some 100, some 60, some 30 fold. Fruit-bearing in God's kingdom is a broad category consisting of every kind of faith and good work.

Whatever we do as believers in Christ, we do in His name, for His glory, and for the love and benefit of our neighbors. The seed of the kingdom has taken root in our hearts and minds.

God's Word is inspired, inerrant, effective, and sufficient. And we have the powerful, unchanging promise from God the Father Himself that He sends forth His Word through His Son to accomplish everything He desires to do. We Christians will stake our every hope upon His glorious, unchanging Word. But we must also give attention to the faithful hearing of God's Word. The parable of the different types of soil teaches us that we must devote ourselves to the hearing of God's Word. The devil seeks to take it away through lack of faith, understanding, and slothful indifference. God's Word needs depth in a person's heart and soul for it to grow lest temptation and persecution scorch it. And the cheap thrills of sin and the world's corruptions will choke God's Word unless they are weeded out of a person's mind and imagination. Faith in Christ and careful attention to God's Word are the soil the Word needs in order to grow and produce fruit for His kingdom.

There is tension to these two sides of our doctrine of God's Word. Do you feel it? On the one hand, there is the promise God's Word will do what the Father desires of it. On the other hand, there is our responsibility to hear the word of God's kingdom lest we lose it. Both must be held in tension.

Did you notice the gap in the lectionary reading today?, vs. 10–17 were omitted. The reading was given so as to give the Lord's parable and our Lord's interpretation of the parable. But I want you to hear what our Lord's says about why He was teaching in parables. It will help us understand better our need to give attention to God's unfailing, effective, and sufficient Word. Matthew 13:10–12:

<sup>10</sup>Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup>And Jesus answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup>For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

Our Lord Himself exhorts His disciples to give attention to the Word of God that has been given to you and more will be given. But take heed, lest what has been given be taken away due to indifference and neglect. God's Word is our great treasure given to

us for our joy and eternal salvation. Receive it, knowing God the Father gives it as your inheritance and eternal blessing.

Blessed Lord, since You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Collect for Proper 10A).

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.