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

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 26A)

November 5, 2017

Text: Matthew 23:1–12

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

Once again, we depart from our congregation's normal tradition. The first Sunday after the Festival of the Reformation is typically the Feast of All Saints. We will observe that great occasion this afternoon at Immanuel as part of our congregations' celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Those two occasions, Reformation and All Saints, are historically and thematically related. Come to this afternoon's service to rejoice in the outstanding good news that we sinners are declared righteous, declared to be saints, in God the Father's sight through the merits and mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having established the proper distinction between Law and Gospel in Matthew 22:34–46, the Lord Jesus now proceeds to give further instruction on how God's people should rightly receive the office of preaching and teaching: the churchly office that is responsible to teach and preach God's Word rightly distinguished according to Law and Gospel. To use the dogmatic language of our Church, the Lord Jesus teaches about the office of the Holy Ministry and life within His blessed Church.

Pastors are men who are called by God through the Church to “preach the Gospel of Christ, read the Holy Scriptures, distribute the Supper, baptize, and comfort poor, troubled consciences in the pangs of death” (Luther, *Sermons on Matthew*, Chapters 19–24, LW 68:142). This authority to administer God's Law and Gospel is conferred upon pastors by the Church. They are to be servants of God's people on behalf of Christ for the building up of the Church in all faithfulness, godliness, and virtue.

The office of preaching and teaching is established by God. It has His blessing and promise. So much so that Jesus teaches that even the scribes and Pharisees, whom He declares to be hypocrites, blind guides, and white washed tombs filled with greed, malice, and envy, are to be obeyed when they teach properly. “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice” (vs. 2–3).

Those unbelieving hypocrites hold a divine office. So they are to be obeyed when they preach properly even though they themselves do not live according to it. This is a challenging teaching, in the 1st century, the 21st century, or any century in between.

Haven't we had to endure scathing criticism from opponents of the Church who are all too ready to point out the hypocrisy of the Church's leaders and her membership? "Ah! The Church is filled with nothing but hypocrites and Sunday morning do-gooders while they live, talk, act, and sin like the rest of us. All those TV, radio, and internet preachers are interested only in money and other forms of worldly pleasure." Haven't you read or heard those kinds of comments? And don't we feel the biting sting of truth behind them, even if such criticism doesn't reflect the whole story? Pastors preach, but do not do as they preach. Church members hear those sermons, confess it all to be true, and do not live according the sermon preached. Yes, dear saints, guilty as charged.

The Lord Jesus isn't condoning the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes. And the Scriptures certainly don't approve of pastors and church leaders who live hypocritical lives of sin, duplicity, and evil. The Lord Jesus warns that false teachers will infiltrate His Church. He calls them false prophets who come in sheep's clothing. They seek to devour Christ's redeemed lambs. Our Lord teaches that we will know them by their fruits, that is, my their words and deeds (Matt. 6:15–20). The apostle Paul, in Romans 16:17, says we are to mark and avoid those who create division because of false teaching and false living. The apostle John writes in II John 10–11, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching (the gospel teaching which says Jesus, God's Son has come in the flesh, and whoever has the Father also has the Son), do not receive him into your house (i.e., house church) or give him any greeting (i.e., welcome as a Christian), for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works." I share these biblical teachings to assure you that we are under no circumstances to tolerate the persistent, false teaching or false living of unrepentant pastors. And yes, the open, public sins of the Church's members needs to be dealt with according to God's Law and God's Gospel.

But the sins of pastors and the sins of Church members does not take away or diminish the authority of the pastoral office to preach God's Word and administer the Sacraments. The Word of God properly preached by hypocritical pastors and the Sacraments rightly administered by unbelieving clergy are still effectively used by the Holy Spirit to call, gather, and enlighten God's people. We believe that wherever God's Word is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered, there the

holy Christian Church can be found (AC VII). Through the power, efficacy, and clarity of God's Holy Word, Christians will be born again in Holy Baptism, strengthened by the forgiveness of sins won by Christ the crucified, and they will be sustained by the preached Word and administered Supper unto eternal life.

God's promises are not negated by the sins of mere mortal human beings. That, dear saints of God, is a marvelous and comforting promise. Your baptism is not dependent upon the sanctity, faith, or holiness of the one who baptizes! The body and blood of Jesus you receive for the forgiveness of your sins are not dependently connected to the personal salvation of the pastor. God's gifts, His Law and His Gospel, are founded upon the character and nature of God Himself! Whenever His Word and His Sacraments are rightly preached and properly administered, they are valid and certain, containing the very power of God to perform the work He chooses to complete.

To be sure, pastors should: 1) preach rightly and 2) live rightly. But even if a preacher should preach rightly and then live wickedly, the Word preached and the Sacraments He administers remains true and certain. Doubts should never arise in the hearts and minds of God's people on account of the sins of the Church's pastors. Doubts should not arise about God's Word even if the pastor is fulfilling his duties in order to be "seen by others" (vs. 5). Yes, there are clergymen who make their robes long or their suits expensive, who place deplorable burdens upon their hearers that they themselves won't lift of funder to do, who seek the highest places of honor in the church and the world, who seek after the applause of men, and who desire all the honorific titles offered by the Church and the world (paraphrase of vs. 4–7). When they preach rightly, Jesus says, "observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do" (vs. 3).

During his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:1–24), Jesus excoriated the Pharisees for their long prayers, their ostentatious displays of charity, and their self-aggrandizing feats of fasting. Never once did Jesus say that because of their evil, we are to stop praying, to quit helping the poor, or abstain from fasting. Quite the contrary, we are to do what they taught – pray, give charitably, and fast – but we don't do it like those hypocrites did, then or now. Instead, we pray in secret, give without notice or attention, and fast in anonymity. God the Father sees. And that is enough for us.

According to Jesus, we are not to seek out honorific titles of worldly praise like rabbi, father, or instructor. Instead, we are to seek the honor of God in all things. For example, if God can be honored by me being called pastor, then so be it. But I am your brother in Christ, a recipient of the same grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus. My

status among you, as pastor, is to be one of a servant appointed to bring to you God's Word. The same desire to show honor to others rather than obtaining it for yourselves is to be your desire in all things. To be called father or instructor or any other title is to be reminded that you are called by God to offer loving service to your neighbor according to your God-given callings and vocations. "The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (vs. 11–12).

In God's kingdom, that is, in the holy Christian Church, "we should be satisfied that we have been adorned with the highest honor, namely, God's grace and mercy; that He has forgiven our sins and made us righteous before Him through Christ; and that we should have eternal life" (Luther, *Sermons on Matthew*, Chapters 19–24, LW 68:158).

We redeemed and forgiven sinners have an unchanging promise. Christ Jesus is in our midst. He is the greatest among us for He humbled Himself to point of death on a cross. Now that He is exalted to the right hand of God the Father almighty, He remains faithful to us. Through His Word and Sacraments, our dear Lord brings us to His heavenly Father through the gracious power of the Holy Spirit. We are made the body of Christ. Whenever we hear preaching, we hear Christ speaking. Whenever we fulfill our vocations as fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, workers, citizen, you name it, Christ Jesus is working through us.

So pray for your pastor and all pastors in Christ Jesus. Pray for all godly vocations that the love of Christ may have free course among us. Pray that His beloved Church, His body, may be built up in all godliness and goodness. To God alone be all glory, power, and honor ...

✠ 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.