

Sermon for 2<sup>nd</sup> Last Sunday of the Church Year– Matthew 25:31-46

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

In Jesus' parable of the tree and its fruit, the bad tree cannot produce good fruit and the good tree cannot produce bad fruit. The Lord is talking about people: good people and evil people. He sums up this parable by saying the following: "I tell you, on the Day of Judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

"... By your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned." Those are powerful words. But in today's world, words just aren't so powerful. Take for example, printed text. Up until the 1500's men dedicated their entire lives to careful and tedious task of copying by hand the Holy Scriptures among every other document. Gutenberg's printing press lightened the load of the scribes and made printed text available to the common man. When the copy machine came along, one could reproduce full documents at the push of a button. And today you can receive a text message with words that aren't even full words. The cliché rings true in our day: "Talk is cheap."

The world is full of cheap talk: empty promises, disappointments, and tears. Broken families, broken hearts, financial and mental oppression – these perpetuate a lifetime of sadness. Satan and your own flesh would have you focus on these things, as opposed to what really matters: the Gospel. The tyranny and enmity of the world seeks to squash your steadfastness in salvation, which your Savior serves you. You see and hear the maliciousness which Satan and the world practice against the Gospel. Not only this, but the other enemies of the Gospel also continue to live and thrive in this world. The separation of the sheep and the goats cannot happen until the last day. Christ lived with Judas among the disciples. You must remain in the world in the midst of crooked, perverse, and ungodly people. Why? The weeds cannot be gathered without rooting out the wheat with them. The weeds are spared for the sake of the wheat. The Gospel's enemies are spared for the sake of the redeemed. Therefore you wait for the day when Christ will return and deliver you. In that Day of Judgment wicked men, death or the devil will not be able to offend or touch you.

You and all the faithful hope for the coming judgment and desire it with your whole heart. What more appropriate theme as the church closes out another year of the Lord's grace in the coming weeks! You desire the Lord's second coming and judgment of the whole world, not in fear and uncertainty, no. The world will be in great fear and calamity. Yet, you anticipate knowing that sin and death can no longer harm you in that day. With the entire church you pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done ... Deliver us from evil." In the day when the Our Father is fulfilled, then you will also hear those glad and welcome words: "Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." These are powerful words. This is the verdict you await ... this is the reason you live.

You may joyfully await the last day and need not be afraid of the judgment. Why? Because Christ has already selected you and placed you among those who shall stand at His right hand. How do you know? The Son of Man has already washed you and called you by name in Holy Baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. These were not cheap words – they cost the Author of Life everything. The King already feeds you in the feast of His Body and Blood. What great joy this brings! How could you not live in mercy and kindness here upon earth and suffer

for Christ's sake? Notice a contrite and forgiven heart nurtured with the incarnate Lord is always the root of all good works.

About the year 326 AD, there was a young man by the name of Martin of Tours (a town located in what's now modern day France) who became a Christian against the wishes of his heathen parents. Though he lived over a millennium earlier, this Martin is the name sake of our Martin Luther of the Reformation. At age 10, Martin of Tours became a catechumen, one who learns the fundamentals of the faith, much like our weekday students do today. At age 15, he joined the newly Christianized Roman military, which was continuing its conquest to the west. Trudging through the bitter cold winters in Germany and France, the young man marched on with his comrades. On one such journey, the troop came to a city gate. There stood a poor half-clothed beggar who asked for alms in Christ's name. Martin was carrying only his sword and soldier's cloak. He took his sword and cut his cloak in 2, giving the surprised and thankful beggar half of the garment. Later that night, so the legend goes, Christ appeared to Martin in a dream wearing the half-cloak saying, "Martin ... has clothed me with his mantle." Dearly Beloved, recall the words of today's Gospel, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of one of these my brothers, you did it to me."

One could deduce from today's Gospel reading that good works are the ticket to heaven. After all, the righteous sheep on the right hand gave food and drink, welcomed and visited the poor and imprisoned brothers. However, before there is even a mention of good works toward the neighbor, the sheep and goats are separated. Based on what? Based on those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That's how it always happens: Redemption first, than works follow. Matthew makes this point clear through other examples in his Gospel. Jesus told the twelve apostles, "... Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward." The good work of giving a drink to the neighbor comes second to the reward already received by the disciple. Because the Apostles and other disciples had received and trusted in the reward won by Christ's death and distributed through His Ministry, their joy was manifested in serving the neighbor. Of them, the King declared: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Martin Luther composed in his baptism hymn the following verse: "Woe to those who cast aside this grace so freely given; they shall in sin and shame abide and to despair be driven. For born in sin, their works must fail, their striving saves them never; their pious acts do not avail, and they are lost forever, eternal death their pardon." Woe to those who cast aside the free gifts of the Gospel. Woe to those who depend upon their own good standing and good deeds. Woe to those who take comfort or assurance in anything outside where God has promised it. Woe to those who comfort themselves outside the grace of Christ or gloss over God's Word to save face and reputation.

Find comfort only in Christ Jesus. He suffered hunger, thirst, pain, death, and hell for you. He appears to you today in Body and Blood. Come inherit the Kingdom which your King has prepared for you. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠