

“Learning Experiences” Matthew 7:15-23 Trinity 8 2022

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus rest upon each and every one of you this day.

It’s often said that experience is the best teacher. I believe it’s true. Back in my IT consulting days, when I was tasked with choosing who to hire, I always went for people who had field experience over people with big degrees. All the “book-learning” in the world cannot compare to actual real-life, on-the-job experience. You can watch a video, but the lesson won’t “stick” like it will if you get in and get your hands dirty. Ask any plumber, electrician, nurse, doctor, police officer, or farmer. Don’t get me wrong. Book-learning and video watching can do an excellent job preparing you for “real life,” but there is no substitute for real-life experience. Of course, there’s also the ugly side of this reality. Book-learning is clean. It’s sheltered. It’s safe. Experience is “real life.” Boy oh boy did I learn this upon leaving the seminary. After five years of school, I thought I was ready for anything the parish could throw my way. Boy was I wrong.

I’ll admit: These past three years have been a real learning experience for me, especially as I consider the lessons appointed for today. Let me explain. It’s not like the texts set before us today have only been understood from a sterile classroom perspective. It’s not like these texts have only been “classroom theory.” “Man, I wonder what

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it’s like to deal with false prophets who give false comfort and assurance. I wonder what it’s like to deal with wolves in sheep’s clothing and diseased fruit trees that bear bad fruit or no fruit at all.” Yeah... that’s not the case. It’s not the case for me. It’s not the case for anyone here today.

The sad fact of the matter is that we all have plenty of life experience in the very areas these texts speak to. The whole reason God’s anger was kindled against the false prophets in Jeremiah’s time was that they were giving false comfort and assurance in His name. They were telling their Israelite brothers and sisters the lies they wanted to hear and then telling them that those lies were God’s Truth. They weren’t doing this out of a great sense of evil hatred for God. They weren’t commanding the people to reject Yahweh and instead worship Baal or Allah or any other false god. Nope. They loved Yahweh. They just didn’t want to offend anyone. They didn’t want anyone to be upset or unhappy. They wanted to be liked and praised by their fellow man. So rather than let God do the talking and call sin what it is—SIN—these guys were giving their own commentary and opinion. Rather than call the sinner to repentance, they were telling the sinner, “Don’t worry. All is well. Everyone is doing it nowadays. No disaster will come upon you. It’s different in your case. God

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understands. Follow your heart. As long as you’re happy, that’s all God really cares about.” Unless you’ve been living under a rock for the past few decades, you have plenty of life experience to know that all of this is still a huge problem.

The same can be said for the false comfort/assurance of works-righteousness. This is what made the Pharisees in Jesus’ time so ravenous and deadly, like hungry wolves. It’s like Satan doesn’t even have to try. We love to hear that we can win God over with enough money, enough good intentions and good deeds and personal sacrifices. This was the comforting lie in Jeremiah’s time. This was the false comfort in Jesus’ time, and it remains the best-selling lie in our time...even amongst good old Lutherans.

But... we already know all this. We have TONS of real-life, down-and-dirty experience in these areas of false prophets, false gospel comfort, and wolves in sheep’s clothing. So, what do I mean, then, when I say that these past few months have been a tremendous learning experience? Well... I suppose I could go into a long litany of examples of just how prevalent false prophets and their seductive message of false comfort are in our culture today.

But... this is where experience has been my greatest teacher. I’ve always known and believed and confessed the Truth that is the Divine

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really and truly serving me with His gifts of mercy, grace, and peace. I was born and baptized into the Lutheran church. This is all I’ve ever really known; i.e., how this—Word and Sacrament—is what Jesus meant when He promised, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Fear not, for it is I—I am!” I’ve known all this, and my seminary schooling only served to enhance my knowledge and understanding, along with three years on the job. And yet... it’s taken these last few months for me to truly understand and appreciate and hold fast to this blessed, Divine reality.

Look around. The whole world seems like it’s coming apart at the seams. And yet... here is your victorious God and Lord—your Immanuel—just as He has promised. Here is the true Gospel comfort! Nothing else compares. Nothing even comes close. Here is Christ, our Rock, and our Anchor in the midst of the storm. Where else would we want to be?! The fact that you’re here today shows that this has been your experience too. I give thanks to God for this, and I pray that you only continue to grow stronger in this blessed faith.

And this is how this blessed growth will take place: By pointing to Christ and proclaiming Christ. “We preach crucified!” Folks: Here is Christ. Here is the sweetest and most truly nourishing comfort and peace you will ever know, both in this life and in the life to come. The

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Gospel Truth is that your sins have been paid for in full with the blood of Christ Jesus. Yes, you will still have crosses to bear. You will still suffer while you make your way through this shadowy valley of death that we so foolishly dare to call “life.” Nobody is immune from suffering. That’s the plain and ugly truth of living in a fallen and sinful world. You’re going to take your lumps. Through it, though, take comfort in the fact that you have been baptized into Him and His death and resurrection. Whether you live or die and everything in between, you belong to Him. The very gates of hell cannot take this blessed reality away from you. The very worst thing that can happen to you is that you fall asleep in the faith and wake up at the heavenly side of your Lord’s feast table. “Oh no! Not that!”

If you’ve heard nothing else today, hear this: You are forgiven, in Christ and because of Christ. Here is Christ, even during the storms. Here is the Lord of Life, even during all the anger and anxiety and death and despair. Remain vigilant. Remain on guard. Remain in Him... and rejoice, for you belong to Him.

And now may this same peace and joy guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him, now and into all eternity. AMEN.