

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

²⁴ “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

²⁸ When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matthew 7:15-29)

Where is the True Christian Church?

Last Friday, I took my son to meet a lady to talk about the possibility of doing an internship with the company she works for. She spent two hours showing us around and talking to us and introducing us to interns and also to leaders of her company. One of those leaders asked me what I did. I told him that I was a minister. So he asked me what church I serve. When I told him Peace Lutheran in Livonia, it clearly didn’t mean anything to him. But he went on to tell me that his grandparents went to a Lutheran church in Farmington. But he couldn’t remember the name of that church and he clearly expected me to know it. Sadly, I didn’t. There is no WELS church in Farmington, so I don’t see their pastors at meetings. And the truth is, there are probably a dozen Lutheran churches within five or six miles of us here. That made think: how many churches are there in Livonia? So I called up Google Maps and typed in “church” to see what would happen. I counted nineteen churches within two or three miles of us here at Peace. If you zoomed out, I’m sure that number would double or triple. There are literally hundreds of Christian churches in Wayne County.

Which one is the right one? Which one is the true Christian Church on earth? I firmly believe that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod correctly preaches and teaches the doctrines that God has given us. For that reason, I would not belong to another denomination. But does that mean that there are no Christians in other churches? Not at all. From God’s perspective there is one and only one Christian Church. It’s made up of all believers in Christ. But we don’t get to see one united Church of Christ here, because faith is in the heart. As much as I want to believe that I know your heart and that I’ve shown you mine, only God can actually look into a person’s heart and see their faith. That makes finding the true Christian Church more difficult. Jesus’ words to us today are practical guidance to answer a very important question: **where is the true Christian Church?**

Jesus talks to us today about finding the true Church, the Church that he established. And the first word of wisdom that he gives us to accomplish that goal is actually a warning: **“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”** This is why it’s so important that we look for the true Church of Christ. As long as this sinful world continues, there will be false teachers. There will be people who lead us away from Christ with their teachings. Jesus compares them to wolves who dress up like sheep so that they can get close enough to attack the flock from the inside. False teachers don’t wear a button that says, “I’m a false prophet.” If they did, you’d run away from them. So they try not to alarm you. They look like us. They talk like us. They seem to be interested in you and your life and they say things that engage you. They make you want to follow them and then, step by step, they lead you away from Jesus.

In the worst case scenario, they know it. They’re like the Jewish leaders who knew Jesus had risen and still paid the Roman soldiers who had been guarding his tomb to tell people they fell asleep and the disciples

stole his body. But I don't really think that the majority of them are like that. St. Paul talks about people who know the truth but don't build the church on the gospel. They use other methods to bring people in. Paul says that those teachers themselves will be saved because they do have faith, but only like people escaping from a burning building. But the congregation they leave behind won't be. Their false teachings didn't lead their people to Christ. It's very unpopular to say today, but not every religious teacher is a faithful follower of Jesus. Not every kind and gracious pastor proclaims the grace of God. Not every nice man or woman really represents the Lord.

So who does? Jesus says, **"By their fruit you will recognize them."** Jesus makes a simple point about fruit trees: either they produce fruit that you want to eat or they don't. Once when I was a kid, we were someplace that had a crabapple tree in the yard. And I thought it would be fun to eat an apple right off the tree. But my dad told me, "They're no good." Even though they look reasonably like an apple, they're not the kind of apple most people would want to eat. No matter how much you spray or fertilize or cultivate that crabapple tree, it's never going to have Red Delicious apples growing on it.

So what fruits show us the true Christian Church? The fruits of faith. A Christian leads a Christian life. Now, it's not absolute. Even good and faithful Christians are still sinners. Sometimes, we do and say things that make it hard to see our faith. And the Bible warns us against hypocrites – against wolves posing as sheep, trying to look authentic so that we follow them. But over the long haul, you do get a pretty accurate picture of who belongs to the true Church and who doesn't. What's in your heart comes out in your life. If your heart is filled with faith in Christ, your life is going to show that, even if sin and repentance are a constant reality. In fact, that willingness to repent, to admit to sin and then to ask for forgiveness from God and our fellow man and then to trust that Jesus has taken our sin away – that is a fruit of faith. But if your heart is filled with sin, with lust, with ego, that's going to show, too. And confirmation certificates and Christian school diplomas and degrees from our WELS college of ministry will not go to change the fruit that comes out.

Jesus says that all you can do with a bad tree is cut it down and throw it in the fire. He is talking about hell. What fellowship do you want to have? With Christ and his Church? Or with those who are racing to hell? It matters who we join and who we follow. Because it does, Jesus says, **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."** It's not enough to stand up here on the day you were confirmed and promise that you will live the way God tells us to. It's not enough to promise that you will come to church and hear the word and take communion regularly. You have to live it. You have to actually make the choices in your life that God calls us to make: to turn away from sin and to show love to each other. You have to actually come and hear and then carry your faith out into the world, sharing it by word and deed. Lip service is hypocrisy.

But Jesus says more: **"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"** It isn't about power. It isn't about being able to do miracles or to heal or to drive out demons. It isn't about secret knowledge that no one else has. It isn't even about having a call into the public ministry. It's about living your faith. Finally, that's why a Christian life is one of the basic requirements of being a pastor or a teacher. You find Jesus' Church where you find people who live Christian lives, who follow the Ten Commandments, who love the Lord their God with all that they are and who love their neighbor as themselves, because they know their Savoir. Even pastors and teachers will find themselves in hell if they don't have that faith to come out in their lives.

Just to make the whole point clear, Jesus tells a parable. He points us to a wise man who builds his house on a rock. When the rains come and the flood waters rise and the wind beats on that house, it stands because it has a solid foundation. But a foolish man builds his house on sand. When the rain comes and the flood waters rise and the wind beats on that house, the sand moves and the house falls. The key to what Jesus says is this: **"everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock"** and **"everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand."** Jesus is still talking about the church. Hearing his teaching and shrugging your shoulders, or even saying, "Yeah, that's right!" but then walking away unchanged is not faith. Faith grabs on to what Jesus says and then looks at my own life with a clear and critical eye. And then it works, day after day, to change my life. Because we're sinners, we'll have a lifetime of changes to make. But faith always works on making those changes.

Is that the way your life works? It would be easy to hear all this and despair. Do I consistently bring forth fruits of faith? Do I as your pastor do that? Do you as a member do that? Or are we guilty of lip service? Of saying all the right things and nodding our heads at all the right places while we're in here, and then going out there and forgetting all that we heard here? Does God's word change us? If we're honest, don't we all have to say, "Not nearly enough"? How many times have you or I been struck right through the heart by something a pastor said because we saw ourselves and our sin in his words? How many times have we caught ourselves being hypocrites? Being unloving? Being the kinds of people that we criticize the most? How often don't we bring forth crabapples instead of Red Delicious?

My friends, we're sinners. But knowing that and repenting of that is a fruit of faith. The truth is, I can only put Jesus' words into action when I know and trust in him. I can only love as God calls me to when Jesus' love fills my heart. I can only bring forth good fruit when God has made me into a good fruit tree. And that is what Jesus did for us. Jesus lived the perfect life we can't live, not even after we come to faith. Jesus always brought forth fruits of faith. He always lived and loved perfectly. That life counts for us today. Jesus then died for us. He didn't deserve to. Death is the punishment for sin. Hell is what sinners deserve. Jesus never sinned. He should've lived forever and laughed at hell. But he suffered hell on the cross and he died because that's what our lips service and our bad fruits deserve. Then Jesus rose to tell us that all our sin is washed away. God has found us innocent. God sees only good fruits when he looks at us. And we build our house on the rock when we build it on Christ. We put his words into action because the Holy Spirit reached into our hearts and gave us faith in Jesus. He has made us new and different people.

And now, God does call us to live for Jesus. God does call us to hear his word and to live by it. When we do that, we're showing that we are the true Church. Yes, that does include pure doctrine. Love for Christ means love for his teaching. False doctrine is sin. It does mean fleeing from wolves in sheep's clothing and exposing their false teaching for what it is. But it also means living in love for each other. It means sharing the good news with people around us. It means fulfilling our callings as parents and children, as workers and employers, as citizens of our country because God calls us to do all those things. It does mean being a force of good in a evil society and a light that shines the way to life in a dying world.

We can do all those things. We want to be a congregation that does all those things. We want to find the true Church that does all those things because in the end, finding the true Church means finding Jesus. He is what the true Church is all about. For that reason, we Lutherans have always maintained that where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered that's where you find the true Church. That is what we are. We are the people of God, helping each other every day to bring forth fruits of faith, to build our houses on the rock of Christ, to fend off false teachers. We constantly encourage each another to live our faith and not just talk a good line. God gives us the power to do all those things in the good news about Jesus. Commit yourself to hearing Jesus' words and putting them into practice. Amen.