

Sermon of Trinity VIII
St. Joseph Parish

July 21, 2024
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“Beware of False Prophets” were among Jesus' last words in His Sermon on the Mount, and warnings can be unsettling. They awake us to vigilance..”

“By their fruits ye shall know them” were also words among his concluding counsel. These words give us confidence that He has given us the means of distinguishing between true and false where prophets are concerned.

The Greek word for “Beware” is literally, “Hold your minds away from” . The implication being we now hold something valuable.. Yes, we already hold the truth of Jesus within to be treasured, and simultaneously admit we are susceptible to the siren calls of lesser treasures and the enticing masquerade of false ones.

Who is a true prophet? A true prophet is one who is called by and then commissioned to a task for God.

The true prophet of God will tell you of his sense of being overpowered when this happened.. think of Isaiah’s call imagery. A true prophet is called by God to deliver God’s word for a specific situation in the life of the people of God..like Samuel’s word of God to Saul to proceed to battle with the Philistines, like Nathan’s word of God’s judgment to king David for his immoral behavior with Bathsheba and Uriah. A prophet is given the ability to interpret the meaning of events and to proclaim the will of God in that historical event in concrete terms, just as Jeremiah did during the siege of Jerusalem. A true prophet speaks predominantly in poetry, for poetry stirs up the spirit of the whole person or community. Abraham Heschel has said, “the fundamental experience of the true prophet is a fellowship with the feelings

of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos. Certainly Hosea's plight with a wayward wife was in sync' with God's plight over the whoredom of Israel in going after the gods of other peoples.

Matthew is concerned to protect a church which was only just attaining a kind of structural integrity and order. It does seem as if the false prophets entering and becoming "belongers" of the Matthean church, if you will, arrived proclaiming that Paul's Life in the freedom of the Spirit really meant something new and exciting and freeing... Their behavior was bringing in a form of anti-structure which would surely have posed a great threat to a fledgling body of Christians. We can only surmise what that was, but the consequence Matthew had learned from experience and study was lawlessness.

While wolves in sheepskins are hard to detect among other sheep, Dawn and Jerry will likely tell you that the only chance for the discovery and conviction of criminals consists of the simple fact that they inevitably leave a trace..some kind of record. They produce fruit. Bad fruit is bound to give itself away sooner or later..a sickness if taken in or a poisoning of other's minds. Even more insidious is what false prophets hold in common: a watering down of the Holy Spirit with unholy spirits from within secular society, so that the spiritual lives of those Christians who heed the false prophets at first diminish with doubt, then deform by what was brought in to fill the perceived vacuum in their faith, then disintegrate when they no longer hear their Master's voice. They become nominal Christians.

We do not need to review the recent history of so many mainline denominations and churches to understand that a false prophet can deceive and dismember the church as the Body of Christ one or ten believers at a

time. Like wandering sheep, Christians can hear there are greener pastures elsewhere and wander off. Some are led astray to follow the gossellers of wealth, for faith in God will bring them money and success. Funny, The false prophet didn't mention the greed and envy to be deposited in one's soul's account.

Christians can be beguiled by the gospel of health and wellness, for after all, says the false prophet, Paul extols the virtues of a sound body. Seeking a body image that "wows" can replace seeking to mold oneself in the image of God that was forming within. Gee, The false prophet didn't mention more pride and lust to enlarge my life as benefits included with heeding his message. ..And what happened to my modesty? False prophets issue a siren call to Christians: Spirituality!! False prophets proclaim the airy liberation Spirituality delivers to those former pew warmers as sufficient for salvation. "You have a relationship with the God, right?"; "Besides, diving deep into spirituality is more accessible on the couch of one's family room than the church; it will be more relevant and so touch your soul more than obsolete messages of old prophets!" ..How then do I deal later with my hunger for a spirituality that is as dependable as I recall God being..that asks something of me in my gratitude for all I have been given or spared? Then there is the gospel of Self to attract us.. heralded by all its earthly attachments..to selfies and blogs, and the proclamations of "my truth".. which are no more than false idols elevations of personal experience into a "truth" others must heed and honor...

There is only one Truth, and He is a Person. Spirituality by itself is a spectator's sport. The real field of battle for the soul is joined in living out Christ's true religion. In sum, false prophets take the pulpit or podium

without a call from God. Their promises do not deliver. Like criminals, they leave clues behind-usually in the form of ill consequences for the lives and souls of the people they deceive.

What are the good fruits? The good fruits are the fruits of the Holy Ghost: charity..joy..patience..peace..patience..kindness..goodness..generosity..gentleness..faithfulness..modesty.. self-control..chastity.

This tree of St. Joseph's is laden with good fruit. I know we're all ripening pretty fast..But we must heed Jesus' "Beware"..Even while Jesus abides within these human frames, we Christians are deceivable. After all, charitable Christians look to the good of the other in loving God. A kind and generous Christian is vulnerable to supporting "humanitarian causes" that are anything but..A faithful, gentle Christian looks to accompany the solitary and the victim who is so needy..and if we have the virtue of patience, we listen long and well..Beware, the Evil One knows these virtues growing within he can co-opt to become the weapons of his false prophets. Nevertheless, we can mix some confidence in with our vigilance. Jean Calvin said this about that: "Nothing is more difficult than to counterfeit virtue."

In the end, Jesus Christ requires his disciples to distinguish between appearance and reality, to know the clues of message and behavior in all who prophesy falsely, and then to know the true prophets calling to us from the pages of the scriptures and to recognize in their behavior the distinguishing marks of a Christian. There is here a challenge to closer fellowship with our Lord and a more loyal discipleship. And lest we become too pleased with our "goodfruitiness" and secure in our self estimation as true Christians, I give you Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Beware" in the humble spirit of Jesus:

“True Christians will rise above all inquisitive examination of others, but they will need a sincere determination to recognize the verdict of God when it comes. At any moment, the nominal Christians may be separated from the real ones...and we may find ..we are nominal Christians as well.”