

8.7.2022 Trinity 8 (Matthew 7:21-23)

Reporters and city officials gathered at a Chicago railroad station one afternoon in 1953. The person they were there to meet was the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner. A few minutes after the train came to a stop, a tall man - six feet four inches with bushy hair and a large mustache stepped from the train. Cameras flashed. City officials approached him with hands outstretched. Various people began telling him how honored they were to meet him. The man politely thanked them and then, looking over their heads, asked if he could be excused for a moment. He quickly walked through the crowd until he reached the side of an elderly woman who was struggling with two large suitcases. He picked up the bags and with a smile, escorted the woman to a bus. After helping her aboard, he wished her a safe journey, and then returned to the greeting party and apologized for keeping the group waiting.

The man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary who had spent his life helping the poor in Africa. In response to Dr. Schweitzer's action, one member of the reception committee said with great admiration to the reporter standing next to him, "That's the first time I have ever seen a sermon walking."

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus declared, "*Not everyone that saith unto Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven*" (Matthew 7:21). It's not enough to say that we are Christians. It's not enough to come to church on Sunday morning fully prepared to complete all the right outward religious motions: to stand, sit, kneel, bow, sing, or listen to a sermon. We must be, like Dr. Schweitzer, a "sermon walking." In this passage our Savior Christ identifies the great gulf that exists between (on one side) an empty profession of faith, and (on the other) the intimate, active, joyful life of the Christian whose heart, soul, and mind have been transformed by the amazing grace, Divine mercy, and unconditional love of God.

There is an infinite difference between a sermon, and "a sermon walking," and in his first epistle St. John expresses that truth to Christians by saying,

“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18), and St. James in his epistle offers a haunting comparison between the body without the spirit, and faith without works. He writes, *“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also”* (James 2:26). We’ve all been to funerals. We know that without the spirit, the body is just an empty, useless shell, and the same is true of our faith if it has no works, it’s empty and useless. As James writes, *“faith without works is dead.”*

Idle faith won’t save us. As the old saying goes, “We are saved by faith alone, but *the faith that saves* is never alone.” Idle faith is not the faith that saves, but instead, it is the faith of a hypocrite, and I came across a short poem by an unknown author that illustrates that truth very well. The poet writes:

I knelt to pray when day was done, And prayed, "Lord, bless everyone;
Lift from each heart the pain, And let the sick be well again."
And then I woke again one day, And carelessly went on my way;
The whole day long I did not try To wipe a tear from any eye.
I did not try to share the load, Of any brother on the road;
I did not even go to see the sick man just next door to me.
Yet once again when every day was done, I prayed, "Lord, bless everyone."
But as I prayed, to my ear Came a voice that whispered,
'Pause, hypocrite, before you pray; Whom have you tried to bless today?
God's sweetest blessings always go, By hands that serve Him here below.'
And then I hid my face and cried, "Forgive me Lord, for I have lied;
Let me but live another day, And I will live the way I pray."

“Let me but live another day, And I will live the way I pray.” Those words are the desperate prayer of the person who has heard and received the Truth that Jesus spoke: *“Not everyone that saith unto Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”* All that we’ve talked about so far points to the truth that saving faith is a faith of action, that Christians don’t love with *“words or tongue, but in deed and in truth.”* Yet as this passage continues we find that to live the way we pray is not only about right-doing, but right-being, the kind of right-being that flows from an intimate relationship with our Savior Christ. In this

passage Jesus said, *“Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity”* (Matthew 7:22-23).

Those words: *“I never knew you: depart from me...”* are the most terrifying words of Holy Scripture, for the presence of Christ is Heaven, and His absence is Hell. Those words are made even more frightening due to the fact that the people Jesus is addressing claim to have done *“many wonderful works”* in His name. To the casual reader, these people appear to be those who have been *“a sermon walking,”* but the truth is, we cannot be a sermon walking apart from our Lord, for He is the Vine, and we are the branches. Apart from Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5).

On that day Jesus spoke a parable, a story that is meant to pierce the hearts of those who are open to His teaching, but whose meaning is lost on the proud. On that day Jesus told the parable of the wise and foolish builders. He said, *“Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it”* (Matthew 7:24-27)

While this parable certainly speaks once more of the need to put our faith in action, as Jesus said, to hear His sayings, and do them, in this parable He is speaking of an even greater and more profound truth, a truth not about right-doing, but right-being. A truth about building our lives, and all we do, on that Rock which is Christ, instead of the shifting sand of our own selves. Listen one more time to this verse, the verse just before He begins to teach through this parable. Jesus said, *“Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have WE not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I NEVER KNEW YOU: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.”*

On the day of Judgment, there will be present those who have done many wonderful works in Jesus' name, but never intimately knew Him as their Lord and Savior. They will stand before God and argue for Salvation based on what they've done, and have not a word to say about what Christ has suffered and done for them. They'll say, Haven't WE prophesied? Haven't WE cast out devils? Haven't WE healed every kind of disease and sickness? In that day, standing before Almighty God, no great work, no religious duty, nothing that WE have done will save any of us. Eternal life is a gift from God, freely given (Romans 6:23), not an award based on our merit or a prize given to the most devout.

Consider the example of Judas, a man who could boast all these gifts. He was one of the twelve, one who was sent by Jesus (Matthew 10:1), and the Gospel of Matthew tells us he was given the power to preach, to "*Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons*" (Matthew 10:8). Yet, in the end and on his own, Judas wasn't able to cast out the devil from his own heart and ended up being our Lord's betrayer. There was also a group of men among the scribes and Pharisees that present us with another example. They were viewed as some of the most religious people of Jesus' day, experts in the Law, and experts in keeping every detail of the Law, but seven times in the Gospel of Matthew we hear Jesus warn them with these words, "*Woe unto you*" scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites (Matthew 23). Jesus said, "*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (Matthew 15:8), or in other words, "*I never knew you.*"

The verses of Scripture we considered today are warnings. In this passage we find a warning against hypocrisy. If we think that we can call Jesus Lord, but not do the will of God, we deceive ourselves. There is a great difference between believing in Jesus, and living a life that is a reflection of His (1 Peter 2:21-23). There is a great difference between an empty profession of faith, and laying down our life for Him (John 15:13). There is a great difference between doing our religious duty, and loving one another as He has loved us (John 13:34).

In this passage we also find a warning to those who think they are doing

“many wonderful works.” To them our Lord appears to say, God doesn’t want your service, if He doesn’t first have your heart. The chief characteristic of an authentic Christian is not right-doing, but right-being, the kind of right-being that finds its source in an intimate relationship with our Savior Christ.

On the day of Judgment, it is my prayer that we all stand before God with lives full of good works, and knowing that none of that work will save us, we would cast our crowns before Him and say, “I have loved you, Lord. I have loved you with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength. That’s all I’ve done. It was You Lord who prophesied. It was You Lord that cast out devils. It was You Lord that fed the hungry, clothed the poor, visited the sick, and it was You, *my Lord and my God* (John 20:28) who suffered, bled, died, and rose again that this child of God could be forgiven and live." So to You be the glory, majesty, dominion, and power; both now and forever, Amen.