PENTECOST 13, B – August 22, 2021

SCRIPTURES – Ps. 26; Isaiah 29:11-19; Eph. 5:21-33; Mark 7:1-13

*“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”* Mark 7

Gee, it’s almost fitting that we have a hurricane coming to shore this morning, because on this morning we hear Jesus unleash a powerful storm of words. And it’s all because of a simple question: ***“Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”*** Notice: Jesus doesn’t answer the question. Instead, He unloads on the Pharisees and scribes who had asked it, accusing them of being hypocrites who were actually working to overthrow, and not uphold, God’s commandments. So much for the gentle and kind Jesus who’s often proclaimed! This Jesus is an angry warrior, rushing into battle!!

He is battling for His disciples – not just Peter and James and John and the rest of the twelve, but all who follow Him and put their trust in Him. He is battling for you and for me. And, it is words that are the focus of the battle. It’s the tradition of the elders, the teachings of rabbis over the centuries on how to keep God’s commands and honor Him, vs. the words that God gave to Moses, which Jesus proclaims and to which alone He holds.

Words. Wouldn’t you think that Jesus had more important things to do… *better* things to do… than get into an argument over words? I mean, it’s actions that really get things done and bring people together, right? Arguing over words is a waste of time. You have your truth and I have mine, after all. Who’s to say who is right?

Well… God is. He’s the Creator of all things, who created with a plan for all things. And so, He knows how all things work and what best upholds that work. He also knows how *we* work, for He sees us and knows us. He tests our hearts and minds. He knows that, since our first parents rejected His will and fell into sin, we are born into this world like them. We are mortal, and so cannot know the end of all things. We are also sinful, and so do not know with certainty what is good and right, or what will bring forth what is good and right. Prompted by our sinful desires we will even at times think that that which is good for us is the true good. This is why Jesus says, ***“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*** He’s not just saying that if the heart is not right the action is not right. We all know that. How many times have you, after hearing a grouchy family member grudgingly say, *“Fine, I’ll do it,”* responded, *“Forget it! If that’s your attitude, I’ll do it myself!”* Yes, we all know that a bad attitude makes even a good deed bad, unpleasing. Jesus is saying more than that, however. He is saying that human commands and teachings do not bring forth worship that pleases God. ***“In vain do they worship Me.”*** Worship that is based on our words and ideas is empty and hollow, no matter how good it seems. God alone knows, and can bring forth, what is good and right, and so pleasing to Him.

This is why Jesus plunges into an argument – a battle – over words. It’s why He doesn’t bother to give an answer, a defense, as to why His disciples eat without washing their hands in the way that is called for by the tradition of the elders, but instead contrasts that tradition with the words that God gave to Moses. Worship – words and actions that please God – is a matter of life and death; of eternal life and eternal death. It’s that important!

Plunge into this argument with Jesus, then. Don’t be afraid to get into an argument over God’s words. In fact, be afraid to *not* get into that argument, to avoid that argument, lest you stand with sinful men and not your God!

Take God’s words in Eph. 5: ***“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”*** *“No, you take them, Pastor! I’d rather avoid them!”* Wait: do we not in our church believe that these are God’s words, given to Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and written down for our blessing? We can’t, then, just write them off and ignore them, as so many do today, by calling them simply reflections of the sexist beliefs of a man who lived in a male-dominated society. They are God’s holy will for us to this day! So, we must wrestle over these words from Eph. 5, personally and with others. But, begin as Paul does: ***“Submit to one another out of the fear of Christ.”*** Before proclaiming what their spouse is supposed to do, husbands and wives are to willingly submit to one another, to put their spouse before themselves. Also, don’t forget what is said to husbands: ***“love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her.”*** Sacrificial love; love that puts the needs of his wife before his own needs: that is the love that Christian husbands are to show to their wives. We who accept these words in Eph. 5 as true words from God that declare what is best for us are not, then, demeaning women. We’re not like the Pharisees and scribes! No, those who reject these words of Eph. 5 – even if they are loving pastors and theologians who speak out for women’s rights and support women’s causes – are more like them. They are the ones putting the traditions of men before the words of God.

Or, consider a woman we spoke highly of last week in church: Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus. “Mother of God,” we rightly call her, for she miraculously conceived and gave birth to the eternal Son of God who is of one being and essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit. ***“Blessed are you among women,”*** Elizabeth said of her; and we Missouri Synod Lutherans agree, for this is the Word of God in Luke 1. But, although we speak so highly of her, we do not pray to her, as many do. Why not? Well, because we do not have a word from God, any verse in the Bible, telling us to pray to her or to any believer (saint) in heaven. Luther’s followers therefore said to their ruler, Charles V, in defense of their refusal to pray to Mary or any saint:

Scripture does not teach the invocation of the saints, or that we are to ask the saints for aid. Since neither a command nor a promise nor an example can be produced from the Scriptures about the invocation of saints, it makes sense that conscience remains uncertain about this invocation. Since prayer should be made from faith, how do we know that God approves this invocation? Without the testimony of Scripture, how do we know that the saints know about the prayers of each one? ...Therefore, [we] should not [be] forced into an uncertain matter, because a prayer without faith is not prayer. (Ap XXI, 10, 13)

This is not just a useless and divisive argument over words. It’s a matter of God’s words, and of the faith – and faithful actions – that God brings forth by His words.

Enter into the battle over God’s words, even if it creates a storm! For, as you do, you are battling along with Jesus. He will be with you in the battle: to lead you in faith, which is the true worship of God; to strengthen and confirm you in that faith; and to use you as His voice in proclaiming that faith. And, just as after a hurricane God brings forth new growth and life, He will bring great blessing – eternal life, for you and for others! – after the storm over His Word passes.

Thank You, Lord, for Your Holy Scriptures, Your words of life in Jesus! Help us hold to them in true faith always. To the praise of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.