

Sermon: 5th Sunday in Lent

Text: John 8:46-59 (v.47): “He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason why you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

Theme: Do you belong to God?

Goal: To strengthen our faith as God’s chosen people, and to improve our Christian behavior as we listen to God’s Word.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: The matter of belonging plays a very important role in our lives. We belong to a family; we belong to a group of friends or to a club; we belong to a church; we belong to a nation... Refugees, homeless and wanderers struggle a lot with these feelings: Where do I belong to? Children of people who often move, like diplomats, military staff and others, sometimes have these strange feelings. I experienced this while in Kenya, with some missionaries’ kids: *Where is my homeland?* Some were born in America, but America was a strange land for them when they went on holidays; some were born in Africa, but they were not Africans... For some, it causes instability and they lose their roots. Others face it as a challenge and an opportunity to know other countries, cultures, languages, and they take advantage of this for their professional life.

What is your belonging status? To whom and to what group do you belong? Jesus was arguing with the Jews in our text, and Jesus said that there are only two options of belonging when it comes to our relationship to God: “He who belongs to God **hears what God says. The reason why you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.**”

I – Belonging by right

The Jews had a very strong feeling about belonging to the Jewish people and to be children of Abraham. They claimed that they

were the only people and race that belonged to God. Whoever wanted to belong to God and be part of God's kingdom must first become a Jew through the rite of circumcision. And they were very proud of this, calling all others "Gentiles".

Jesus confronted them in our text. To belong to God's Kingdom is not just a matter of right because someone was born with this status. It is also a matter of faith and behavior. As they claimed to be children of Abraham, Jesus challenged them to have the same faith and behavior as Abraham had. Jesus became even aggressive with them because they wanted to kill Him; and Jesus said to them: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of the liars" (v. 44). "The reason you do not hear (what God says) is that you do not belong to God."

To belong to God is not just a matter of being born in a Christian family, to be member of a church, and to accomplish certain duties. It is a matter of GRACE!

II – Belonging by Grace

It is well known that God had chosen Abraham and from him God built up His people of the Old Testament time. But when God called Abraham, the promise was not just to the bodily offspring of Abraham. God was clear when He said: "And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). We are included in this promise. The Apostle Paul wrote a lot about this concept in his letters, that children of Abraham are those who believe like Abraham believed, and not just those born from his family. The sacrifice of Isaac, as we heard in the Old Testament reading, was the summit of Abraham's faith and obedience to God's Word. "He who belongs to God hears what God says."

We have belonged to God since we were baptized. In that moment, God declared: “You are my beloved son, whom I love.” We didn’t do anything to deserve that status of children of God. Our parents, godparents and pastor heard what God said and obeyed Him, believing in His promises through the water and the Word in the Holy Baptism. This is God’s grace, that he chose and accepted us into His family. We grew up coming to the Sunday School and to the Church, listening to God’s Word, strengthening our faith and shaping our behavior according to God’s will. We confessed our faith before the congregation when we were confirmed. And we kneel before God’s Table to received His forgiveness through the body and blood of Jesus. This is a privilege we have because we belong to God. The Apostle Paul wrote: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:18,19). And St. Peter wrote: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed (bought, purchased) from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18,19).

Unfortunately, many despise this grace of God and turn their back to God, following the devil and the desire of their hearts and going back to the old way of darkness. Kyrie Eleison: Lord, have mercy.

III – Our behavior as belonging to God

Martin Luther preached about this text, and he brings it to the day-by-day life, how it affects our faith and our behavior when we are conscious that we belong to God by His grace in Jesus. Luther wrote: *Jesus has spoken a sweet word to us. “To be of God” (to belong to God) is to use one’s ears willingly to hear the*

preaching of the Word, willingly accept reproof when wrong has been committed, and also to pray, preach, instruct, comfort, reprimand, and give consolation with the tongue. Such ears and tongues are of God and good... When the heart, therefore, is disciplined and is concerned with helping the neighbor, and not being irritated with him, such a heart is of God. Thus, the things created by God, as eyes, ears, mouth, and heart, are said to be "of God" when they are guided by God's Word and do not wish to do, see, hear, speak, or think anything contrary to God. Although it happens from time to time that they err and say things that are profane when they ought to pray, and the heart is irritated when it ought to be cheerful, such things are, indeed, wrong. However, when we give up our evil ways and confess that we have done wrong and ask for mercy, this is what is known as stumbling or falling, but it is not called having the devil or being of the devil. For we are in the process of turning back and have resolved that we never want to commit the wrong again.

However, what is meant by keeping Christ's Word? Nothing else than to believe what he promises us in the gospel concerning the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, that is true and that in faith we should hold fast to such hope. He who does this, says Christ, has eternal life and has nothing to fear with respect to sin, death, hell, and final judgment, for in Christ are found grace and mercy in fullest measure.

Conclusion: For two thousand years people from every tribe and nation have heard those words and kept them, as we do today. Jesus speaks his peace to us. We are forgiven. We shall not see death, but through its gaping mouth which would devour all men, Jesus smiles upon us. He has gone through that portal, broken its hold. We see life. (Quoted by (Phil Brandt, pp 45,46,.58). This is our Lent/Easter Hope. "He who belongs to God hears what God says." Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 02 April 2017