

Sermon: 8th Sunday after Trinity

Text: Acts 20:17-38 (v.32): “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Theme: Admonishments and Encouragements

Goal: To remain faithful to the truth in Christ

Dear Friends,

Introduction: The Apostle Paul was finishing his third Missionary Trip. He had reached Europe and had founded many churches on that continent. He was on his way back to Jerusalem, traveling by ship. In one of the harbors, called Miletus, he decided to call the leaders of the church of Ephesus – not too far from Miletus, to meet with him. Paul wouldn't have had time to go there and to spend some days with them. As far as we know, *Ephesus is the city in which he had spent more time as a preacher than any other single city*, (Phil Brandt, p. 20). He had settled there for three years, teaching and preaching publicly and going from house to house.

This is one of the rare sermons of Paul recorded in the Book of Acts. It's a farewell sermon, as he would never more see those leaders he had prepared to be pastors of Jesus' flock. There are three main points to highlight in Paul's sermon, that are still very valid for our days.

I – About his ministry

First of all, he spoke about his ministry and the message he had delivered to them. “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”

This echoes the preaching of John the Baptism and the preaching of Jesus when they began their ministry: “Repent and believe the Good News” (Mark 1:15). There is no other way to come to God and to be member of the Kingdom of God than to repent from our sins and to believe in Jesus for forgiveness of our sins. It is the old way, daily renewed by God’s grace.

All other doctrines and deeds of the church must have this ground. If the Law is not proclaimed anymore, calling people to repentance and showing clearly what is wrong and what is right, the church loses its purpose. The truth needs to be proclaim, and it hurts many. Thanks God that the Law hurts us. This means that we still have a conscience that accuses us and that we need help from outside; because by ourselves we are not able to fulfill the Law.

Unfortunately for many the Law is just a guideline, that they try to follow as a way to present themselves as godly people before God. They are not driven to repentance through the Law and to faith in Jesus. Without repentance, there is no need for forgiveness and faith.

But for those who are deeply touched by the Law, and repent from their sins, there is good news: Jesus loves and forgives everyone who believes in Him! He accepts us in His Kingdom and gives us a new life to be lived according to His will.

For Paul, and for every pastor, the goal of his ministry was: “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.... For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God”.

Now that he shows himself as an example, he warns and pleads to the leaders of the church:

II – Warnings

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

Pastors are not exempt from temptations and sin. They need also to repent daily and believe in God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ. So, “Keep watch over yourselves”. Paul wrote about his own struggles and fights: “Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” (1 Corinthians 9:26,27).

And the pastors are to watch over the flock, the church of God. The church doesn’t belong to the pastors; she belongs to God! And the pastors are not to rule over the flock, but to shepherd them, because we are working under the supervision of the Holy Spirit, who made us overseers of God’s flock.

We have here the Doctrine of the Call, very precious to the Lutheran Church. No one is a pastor because he just decided to be a pastor. No one can shepherd a congregation without a regular call. This is not a personal matter, but it is God’s matter through the church.

Therefore, Paul warns them and us against false prophets and false doctrines: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”

This is, unfortunately, what happened and still happens with the Christian Church. Luther wrote: *Where our Lord God builds a church, there the devil builds a tavern... It has always been this*

way, that where the truth is preached, there the devil has intermingled false doctrine and heresy. Just look at a garden; inevitably when good seed is sown, weeds also crop up, and one has to work hard to uproot them, in order for the good seed to take root... Since this situation will never change... we should be on our guard and beware of false prophets. Clearly Jesus means: I have given you my Word and faithfully taught what you are to do, how we are correctly to understand the Ten Commandments, properly to pray, properly to fast, and to trust in God to sustain you. What matters now is that you be on guard, lest you be led astray from this teaching... Accordingly, the Lord wants us to adhere strictly to the Word and not allow ourselves to be diverted from it... It will surely happen that where the Word is pure and undefiled, there wolves will not remain outside but will enter in without fail... to see if they can pry us away from the Word and do us harm... To sum up, God's Word should be our shield and buckler. If we keep this in mind and act accordingly, the devil cannot lead us astray. But if we forsake God's Word, then the devil has already felled us. (Quoted by Phil Brandt, pp. 32-39).

III – Encouragements and Conclusion

Paul concludes his sermon saying: “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

As we are celebrating the 24th Anniversary of St. Thomas, this sermon of Paul could have been preached as a farewell sermon by Pr. Huppe, by Pr. Dieter, by me, or by any other pastor. The goal of each minister is not to have a successful ministry, but to be a servant of God to help people to reach heaven, shepherding God's flock in such a manner that they are nurtured with Word and Sacrament, remaining faithful in daily repentance and faith in Jesus. Amen.

