

### ***A Fire and a Hammer***

In the name of him who came to cast fire on the earth, dear friends in Christ: Peace and tranquility. Freedom from conflict. No one arguing or upset. Everyone getting along, cooperating together, in perfect harmony of mind and purpose. We want that, don't we? We want it in our homes. We want it within our extended families. We want it where we work. And perhaps most especially, we want it here in the church. I mean, this is supposed to be a place of refuge from all the turmoil and conflict in the world. When there's trouble in the other places in our lives, here at least we ought to be able to find relief. Besides, we have the sense that it's part of our witness to the world. What does it say to outsiders when they see us Christians arguing among ourselves? Especially arguing about seemingly trivial points of doctrine that outsiders can't begin understand? No. Most particularly here in the church we want peace and quiet.

And in today's Gospel Jesus says, "Sorry. You can't have it. And if that's what you're expecting, you're wrong." The reason for this is simple. Here in the church God saves people from sin and death by his Word of truth. And wherever that truth is, Satan will attack it. That's what he does. He is a murderer and a liar. He doesn't want people to be saved by God's Word of truth. And the way he destroys them and keeps them in the bondage of sin and death is by twisting, changing, distorting, and otherwise abusing God's truth. There's a reason we call this the church militant. We are at war. It's the war of the truth that saves against the myriad of lies that damn souls to hell. And there can be no peace or agreement between the two. Thus the church is the last place we should expect to find peace – at least peace in the worldly sense of the term: the absence of conflict. Make no mistake, there is peace here; but it's peace with God: the peace he gives when for Christ's sake we hear and know that our sins are forgiven, the peace we have when we believe God's Word of truth about Jesus and what he has done to save us by his suffering and death on the cross. Satan's goal is to rob you of that peace, which means that you have to fight, fight hard and steadily, to defend it. Your life depends on it.

And in today's lesson from the prophet Jeremiah, we're told how to defend ourselves. Because true faith comes by hearing the powerful Word of God, those things that stand against it: lack of faith, doubt, error, misplaced trust – these things come of hearing and taking to heart Satan's lies. Therefore the Lord says, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak the visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord." Let me tell you about the false prophets the Lord is referring to there. First, they looked and sounded legitimate. They were the chief priests, religious leaders, and celebrated Bible scholars of their day. Second, they vastly outnumbered the true prophets of the Lord – men like Jeremiah who were like lone voices in a room filled with loud shouting. And finally these false prophets were hugely popular with the people. They always drew the biggest audiences. They had the greatest numbers of followers and admirers. Why? Because they told people what they wanted to hear.

The same can be said about today's false prophets. They look and sound legitimate. They carry around their Bibles and even read from them, pulling a passage (almost always out of context) that seems to support their teaching, and then they proceed to teach ideas that come from their own imaginations. There are a lot of these characters. They vastly outnumber true preachers of God's Word. And they are popular. They have the biggest churches. They sell

the most books. They make the most money. And they do it all in the name of the Lord. But the Lord did not send them and they do not proclaim his truth.

What do they proclaim? We already heard one thing: they fill people with vain hopes. In Jeremiah's day the false prophets were saying that the Lord was just one of the gods in a wider pantheon of deities, and you could worship him along with Baal and Ashtoreth and the other gods of the Canaanites. The vain hope was that you could cover all the bases. If one god didn't give you what you want, you could choose another who might come through for you.

Today false prophets teach various forms of universalism: the notion that all religions contain some truth and it doesn't matter which one you choose because they all lead to the same place. And like I say, there are various forms of this. One major Christian church body (the biggest, in fact) teaches that since there is only one God, anyone who worships any god by whatever name and in whatever system of religion must therefore be worshipping the Lord God – they just don't know it. So, they actually believe in Jesus. They just don't know him by that name. And so in the end, they too will be saved (it's just that they have to spend a lot more time in purgatory than someone who actually worships him by name and in specifically in their church).

Another popular vain hope taught by false prophets in our day is that there is no such place as hell; or if there is, God is too nice a guy to actually send anyone there (well, maybe a few folks: real monsters like Hitler and so forth, but not regular folks like you or me). Funny, Jesus had a lot to say about hell. He said it's a place of eternal torment, and that you'd be better off chopping off your hands and gouging out your eyes if that would help keep you from the sins that will get you sent there. A variant of this vain hope is that there is a hell, yes, and it's a place of torment for the damned. It just doesn't last forever. At some point the Lord will decide the wicked have had enough punishment and then either let them go or erase them from existence. Poof! They're gone. But again, this is an idea that springs from the mind of men who don't want to believe that a righteous and holy God could allow something so awful as sinners being tormented forever. The trouble is that isn't what the Lord himself says about it. Who are you going to believe?

One more vain hope taught today: "God loves you and wants you to be happy." Now, there is a sense in which this is true. God does love you. He sent his Son to die for you. And he does want you to be happy – in an ultimate and eternal sense. That is, he wants you to come to repentance for your sin and to faith in Jesus your Savior so that in him you will have life. And that will be a happy life. But the way the false prophets teach it is that God wants you to be happy right now. And therefore if you think something will make you happy, it must be God's will for you. So, tired of the spouse you've got? Think someone else will make you happier? Go for it. It's God's will. Or someone make you really mad? It's okay to hate them and hold a grudge against them – as long as it makes you happy. And if it turns out we're wrong about the commandments of Christ not applying to you when you break them for your happiness sake, there's no need to worry because we've already determined that hell doesn't exist anymore. You're safe. See how it works?

What else were the false prophets proclaiming? From Jeremiah we read, "They say continually to those who despise the Word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you'." To put it simply, they were telling people that their sins were okay, that they incurred no consequences. God doesn't get angry with sinners or bring them into judgment. Or maybe he's changed his definition of sin. What used to be a sin isn't anymore. Thus the people who

listened to the false prophets were free to go on living in all kinds of immorality and wickedness. Jeremiah and the few faithful prophets had a different message. "Because of all your evil ways the wrath of God is coming. He will punish you for your wicked deeds and you will be destroyed." Does anyone care to guess how things actually turned out? Yes, there's a reason Jeremiah's writings made the Bible's final cut and the writings of the false prophets didn't. His words turned out to be from the Lord. And thus they also turned out to be true.

Of course today's false prophets are saying the same thing. And perhaps nowhere do we see this more clearly than with the whole gay agenda thing. God's design and his Word on the issue are clear. He made us male and female in his own image. He designed the sexes for each other. He intends that we express our sexuality only in marriage: a lifelong commitment of one man and one woman. It's really not complicated.

But you wouldn't know that by listening to those who claim to speak for the Lord in our time. They say that when the Bible was written, people weren't as enlightened as they are now. Now we know better – that though condemned by sacred Scripture as an abomination, homosexual behavior is perfectly natural and good. They even say God told them so. I've read documents from the ELCA in which they say that the Holy Spirit has revealed something new in our time, and that he is leading them to accept gay marriage, and openly practicing gay and lesbian pastors, and so on. As a church body they took that plunge some time back. So did the Episcopal Church in our country. The biggest Presbyterian Church body in the US went that way about a year ago. And it was a big issue among the United Methodists when they met a couple months ago for their every four year general assembly in Portland. They decided not to make a decision because they know it will split their church. Then I guess they'd have call themselves the un-united Methodists. So, by putting off the issue, by the book anyway, the whole gay package is not allowed or approved in their church. The trouble is that they're not enforcing their rules. And those pushing the gay agenda won't let it rest. In defiance of the greater church body, one of their districts out in California just elected a lesbian bishop to lead them. They're thumbing their noses at the rest of the church and saying, "Yeah, we broke the rules. What are you going to do about it?" They know that in the end the church as a whole hasn't got the will to continue the fight. For the sake of peace in the family, they'll look the other way. Eventually they will cave in and come to accept their unscriptural view.

And this is a sad thing. You know that I meet fairly regularly with the some of the other pastors in town. One of them whose church body recently approved the pro-gay agenda told me that they were just tired of fighting about it. It had been going on for 20 years and the side that stood with Scripture and God's Word said, "We've had enough. We just want peace in the church. We don't like it; but to end the fighting, we're going to allow it."

Now, it's never good to mix the straw of sinful man's so-called wisdom with the nutritious wheat of God's Word. It makes bad bread that's really hard to chew. And they're wrong about thinking they'll have peace if they let those who oppose God's Word to get their way. They will soon learn what parents do who raise their kids that way. If when little Jonny pitches a fit big and long enough the parents give him what he wants for the sake of peace, they don't get peace. No, instead they've just taught Jonny that pitching a fit works. And the next time he wants his way over the better judgment of his parents, he knows how to get it.

Fortunately, for the present at least, our own church body has been spared this particular fight. But it's coming. You can depend on it, especially since fewer and fewer churches are taking the biblical stand we do and because our culture as a whole has largely embraced the view of the other side. And this is only one example of the conflicts we have with

those who want to distort or change God's Word. I picked it because it's so clear and timely. Within our church we have our own fights on other issues, but they all come down to the same question: will we stand and fight for God's Word of truth or will we listen to the voices of the false prophets who offer easy answers that are soft on the ears and that make us more comfortable with our sins?

At the conclusion of today's text the Lord says, "Is not my word like fire? And like a hammer that breaks rock to pieces?" It's a powerful description of God's Law. The thing to see is that both a fire and a hammer are instruments of destruction. Fire burns things up. A hammer smashes them to bits. That's what God's Law is supposed to do to sinners like you and me. It's supposed to destroy our pride, our self-righteousness, the excuses we make for our sins. It's supposed to reveal what we are: rebels against the Lord, idolaters who trust in the false gods of money, health, fame, and what have you. It's supposed to bring us to despair of ourselves and fill us with the fear of being damned forever by God as we richly deserve. Why? So that we will come to repentance and place our trust in Jesus our Savior.

The false prophets all have this in common: they take the heat out of the fire. They take the blow out of the hammer. That's the theme that runs through their teaching: you aren't such a sinner. God is happy with you as you are. You don't need to repent. And thus you do not need a Savior.

My friends, we need to keep the heat in the fire of God's Law. It should burn when we hear it. We need to keep the blow in the hammer. It should hurt when it falls. The Word of God's Law must be proclaimed among us in all its terrifying truth and severity precisely so that we will be scorched in spirit and so led to repentance. We need to be broken in our hard hearts in order to see our need for a Savior as great as the one God sent in his Son. We dare not listen to the false prophets who water it down and soften it – as much as we'd like have it that way. No, as hard and painful as it is, we have to fight for the truth; which means we won't have peace in the world, but we will have peace with God through Jesus Christ.

That's because a fire and a hammer don't only destroy. They're also used constructively to purify and to build things up. So it is with God's Word. Through Jesus the fire of God's Word of forgiveness cleanses us from our sins. The hammer of God's Word of Gospel shapes us to be the living stones of his temple. Therefore just as we need the fire of God's Law in all its hot fury and the blow of the hammer in all its strength, so also we need the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified to redeem sinners and to give us eternal life. He faced the fire and the hammer of the Law for us. That's the good news. He was broken that so that we could be made whole. And even now through God's true and holy Word he is purifying us and building us up to press on in the fight of the church militant. May he continue to do so until we all become part of his church triumphant. Then we will know perfect peace. God grant it to us in Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***