

“Fight the Good Fight”

Luke 7:18-28

Last week, we heard John the Baptist make everyone feel uncomfortable. He calls the people to repent. He calls them a “brood of vipers.” There is a place for that type of preaching within the kingdom of God. The issue is that most people are convinced that their understanding of God is correct. Even the terrorist who is blowing themselves up in the hope of killing others, they think that they are doing a service to God.

They have a misunderstanding about who the Messiah really is. They have a misunderstanding about who God really is. I have been teaching the 5th and 6th grade religion class at St. James. Right now, I am trying to explain to them the Trinity and how Jesus is true God and true man. These faithful young children of God do not have a complete understanding of who the Messiah really is. However, I have chosen to confront their lack of understanding of who the Messiah is in a different way than I would suggest confronting the lack of understanding demonstrated by the bomb-toting terrorist.

The one difference (as if there is only one difference between the terrorists and the St. James students); the one difference is that, even though the 5th and 6th graders do not have a complete understanding of all the intricacies of the three persons being one God (as if it is possible for any of us to have a complete understanding of the Creator of the universe whose presence stretches beyond the borders of His creation. Think about that for a while.) Even though those children do not have a complete

understanding of God, they are faithful children of God in search of the truth. They confess their faith in the One true God whose fullness they cannot comprehend. They are sure of what they hope for and certain of what they do not see. That is the definition of faith from Hebrews 11.

One of the primary places they do this is here, in worship – confessing their faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. They join in with the rest of us who have no way of completely knowing the fullness of God, and they make a confession of faith which does express the fullness of God’s salvation and the fullness of what He has chosen to reveal about Himself.

Dealing with children who are learning, and even when dealing with the adult layperson who is continuing to learn and grow in their understanding about God, it is important to deal with them differently that you would with a pastor who is teaching false things. When John the Baptist calls the scribes and Pharisees a “brood of vipers,” from a theological perspective, he is punching them in the mouth. St. Paul compares ministry to being in a boxing match. In 1 Corinthians, he says, “I do not box as one beating the air.”

There are two reasons to engage in verbal sparring. Most of our training is to teach the people of God how to defend themselves against a false teacher who is going to do them harm. This is why we teach children (and adults) things like the catechism. This is why we try to correct and rebuke false ideas about God before those ideas take hold. And even this kind of verbal sparring can hurt. What needs to be clear is that sparring and training with someone is not the same as stepping into the ring with the false teacher who is looking for a fight.

It was not wrong for John the Baptist to verbally throw a punch and call these men a “brood of vipers,” due to their position as self-proclaimed “keepers of the Law,” they have chosen to step into the “boxing ring.”

When Jesus confronts the scribes and Pharisees in Mt. 23, He punches them in the mouth. He says, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. You are whitewashed tombs; beautiful on the outside, but inside you are filled with dead men’s bones and every uncleanness.” That is just one of the seven “woes” with which Jesus pummels them.

They had stepped into the ring. It’s like what Mike Tyson said of his opponents: “Everyone has a plan until you get punched in the mouth.”

John the Baptist’s disciples come to Jesus and clearly do not have a complete understanding of who the Messiah really is. They have heard the faithful testimony of John who proclaimed Jesus to be the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” They may have even been present when John baptized Jesus and God the Father proclaimed “This is my Son whom I love, with Him I am well pleased.”

Jesus does not punch them in the mouth. These are faithful men in search of the truth. So they ask Jesus, “Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus doesn’t even scold them. And before Jesus answers them, He heals many people of all sorts of diseases, casts out evil spirits, and restores the sight of many who were blind.

Then He answers them and says, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.” When you read Isaiah chapter 35, this is exactly what Isaiah had foretold would happen when the Messiah would come.

He deals with them in gentleness and leads them to the Word of God. These men had not stepped into the ring. They did not need to be “punched in the mouth.” They needed to hear the Word of God. Now the Word of God is not all smiles and hugs. However, as C.F.W. Walther classically stated in his work “The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel,” “the Gospel must predominate.

Properly applying Law and Gospel is, as Walther says, “The highest art of the Christian in general and the theologian in particular.”

What does all this mean? We need to look at how Jesus, and John the Baptist, and St. Paul, and the Old Testaments prophets dealt with those who had proclaimed themselves to be authorities versus how they dealt with the average layperson. Because false teachers throw punches at everybody and do them harm – even when they are convinced that they are doing a service for God, God’s representatives are forced to step into the ring to stand in harm’s way because the shepherd’s job is to protect the flock.

These words apply to the laymen as well, which is why part of my calling is to teach you how to defend yourself. Everyone loves Paul’s words to Timothy, “Fight the good fight of faith.” The challenging part is hearing how Paul says to do this. In his words immediately before, he warns of those who have an “unhealthy craving for controversies and quarrels about words.” He says, “Flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith.”

In balancing the use of Law and Gospel, regardless of your vocation, this isn’t just about pastors; in balancing the use of Law and Gospel, we pray for God’s mercy when we fail, and we will fail often. As we train together and learn to defend ourselves, forgive me if I ever punch too hard. And please tell me if I do. It is never my intent to do harm. Strive to be patient and gentle. Of one thing I am quite confident, when we stand before the Lord on the Day of Judgment, He will not be mad at you or me for not verbally punching enough people in the mouth. Amen.