

“The Harvest is Plentiful”

Luke 10:1-20

Last week, in our Epistle lesson, we were reminded that those who are ruled by the sinful nature will not treat us with patience or kindness. Christ and His message of forgiveness have always been despised and rejected by the majority in this world. The people of God have repeatedly been referred to as “the faithful remnant.” Unfortunately, that is just the way it has always been.

But that doesn't mean it's OK that masses go on wallowing in their unbelief or apathy toward God. Here in Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells us that “The harvest is plentiful.” It is the workers that are few. And that we should pray to the Lord to give us strength to go out among the unbelievers. But before you book passage on your journey to the jungles of Papua New Guinea, have some meaningful conversations with your friends and family whose baptismal faith has been pushed aside to where the Gospel has become a lower priority. Apathy, rather than outright unbelief seems to be the more problematic issue – at least as far as I see it here in Quincy. (Although a pretty strong case could be made that apathy equals unbelief.)

As God's people, we are faced with serious questions about how to best go about proclaiming the joy of the Gospel and the truth of God's Word. This is something Jesus had to teach His disciples. There are many theories out there as to what is the best practice. This question is debated at seminaries and within churches all the time: What is the best way to reach those who are not here to receive God's gifts of Word and Sacrament?

How should you, and how many times should you confront your friends, neighbors, or loved ones concerning their apathy, lack of faith or their sinful lifestyle? When does speaking to them about their lack of

relationship with their Lord become no longer profitable for them or you?

Unfortunately, there is no clear answer. In the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus says to leave the 99 and focus all of your energy and attention on finding the one lost sheep and carrying him back to where he belongs.

But then in today's Gospel reading, Jesus gives us another model with which to work. He tells His disciples that "whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you.'"

That is, if someone has rejected and stayed away from Christ and His Church, that person needs to understand that there are consequences for those actions, or lack of actions, as the case may be. This is what I was talking about last week when I quoted C.F.W Walther who said, "There cannot be faith in a heart that has not first been terrified." The Lord tells His disciples to "wipe the dust off your feet" so it is made clear to those who have rejected the Word of God that they have no part or fellowship with the believers. Because the one who hears you, hears Jesus. And the one who rejects you, rejects Jesus. And the one who rejects Jesus, rejects the Father who sent Him.

The Lord has given us, basically, these two models to be guides for our actions: seeking the Lost Sheep and wiping the dust off your feet. Unfortunately, there is no handbook on how to best apply these models for each individual situation that arises.

It seems that the Lord has given us a Law approach and a Gospel approach – but not really. I quoted this last week, but I will take any opportunity to quote from the book: *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, by C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. He wrote: "Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular."¹

¹Walther, C. F. W. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1986, p.42.

Walther wrote that if the Law has not yet caused the person to taste the bitterness of his sin, then the Gospel will be nothing but a pillow for his carnal mind; and he will continue in his sinful life and imagine that he will eventually land in heaven.²

Therefore, we do no favors for our friends and loved ones by glossing over their sins so that they never have to feel remorse, guilt, or shame for their sin. You become an enabler, and they never turn away from their sinful lifestyle. Everyone must taste the bitterness of sin. Only then will they appreciate the sweetness of the Gospel.

However, Walther also very rightly states: “the Word of God is not rightly divided [between Law and Gospel] when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.”³ That is, if “wiping the dust off of your feet” is the way you react to most situations, there may be a problem.

I said earlier that it seems as if the Lord has given us a Law approach and a Gospel approach with which to deal with those who are lacking a good relationship with their Creator and Redeemer. However, it is not as simple as that.

If the sweet words of the Gospel, the Good News of the forgiveness of sins won for us through Christ’s death and resurrection, is preached to those who have no remorse for their sinful life, they will remain comfortable in their sins, and they will never experience the joy of Christ in this life or the next.

Once again C. F. W. Walther is correct when he said: “[In regard to those who have not been effected by the Law] since they had not become alarmed over their sins, it had not been possible for them to believe. For there will not be faith in a heart that has not first been terrified.”⁴ It hurts to look into the mirror of the Law. It is the Law that cleaves the heart and cuts

²Ibid., p. 44.

³Ibid., p. 403.

⁴Ibid., p.278.

us to the core. But this is done in love, because only when the sinful heart is rent asunder do we see the hand of God at work healing us and mending us back together.

Likewise, it is a grievous sin to preach the Law to sinners who are already terrified – to those who already know that they are poor, miserable sinners.⁵ It is these to whom nothing but the gentle words of the Gospel should be preached. They are the Lost Sheep that the Good Shepherd will carry home on His shoulders.

As was said before: to properly divide the Word of God in regard to Law and Gospel is the highest Christian art and the most difficult task. How many times should you confront your friends, neighbors, or loved ones concerning their lack of faith or sinful lifestyle? When does speaking to them about their lack of relationship with their Lord turn into nagging? There are no easy answers. Sometimes this means “wiping the dust off your feet” and sometimes it is offering the gentlest and most gracious words to that terrified lost sheep or the ones struggling with the thorn in the flesh.

But don’t beat yourself up if that person fails in their relationship with God. And don’t pat yourself on the back too much if the Lord calls them to faith. Your responsibility is for the Word of God to be active and held before them in what you say and do. In the hymn we just sang, the second verse says, “If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul, You can tell the love of Jesus, You can say He died for all.”

You do not have to be an eloquent speaker to share the Gospel. The witness of a lifetime of devotion to the Lord is a powerful witness in this world of apathy and unbelief. But our confidence is not in ourselves. Have confidence in Christ who is Lord of this plentiful harvest. Amen.

⁵Ibid., p. 101.