

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Advent 3
Saturday, December 11, 2021 at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, December 12, 2021 at 9:00 a.m.

“Fight the Good Fight”

Luke 7:18-28

Last week, we heard John the Baptist make everyone feel offended, uncomfortable to say the least. He calls the people to repent. He says to them, “You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?” 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 the correct understanding. Even the terrorist who is blowing themselves up in the hope of killing others, they think that they are doing a service to God.

Our goal within the church is to struggle for and wrestle with the truth. What plagues the world is a misunderstanding about who the Messiah really is. The terrorists who kill in the name of their god obviously have a misunderstanding about who God really is. Probably the most difficult, but obviously one of the most important things I teach in Confirmation class is trying to explain to them the Trinity and how Jesus is true God and true man. We are in the midst of discussing that right now.

These faithful young children of God do not have a complete understanding of who the Messiah really is. However, when I teach, I choose 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 our Confirmation students); the one difference is that, even though these children 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 these 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 Christian 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 or other authority who is teaching false things. When and how do you speak up when you are confronted with something which is false or troubling?

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.” He throws punches with purpose.

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 needs to get knocked out.

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.” John throws “haymakers” at them. Jesus does this also.

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.”

They should not have to ask the question, “Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?” In answering, Jesus does not punch them in the mouth. These are faithful men in search of the truth. Jesus doesn’t even scold them. And before He 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. It is almost word for word.

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. False teachers throw punches at everybody and do them harm. If you ask them, they will tell you they are doing a service for the Lord. 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 from those who are striking them.

However, learning the truth of the Word of God so as to know how to defend yourself is a necessary skill of the sheep, not just of the shepherd. I can't follow you around and step into every conversation you have, which is why part of my calling is to teach you how to defend yourself. How do we do this? Paul says to Timothy, "Fight the good fight of faith." We start with knowledge of the truth. You must be involved with Christ's Word of Law and Gospel and His true church.

The challenging part is applying that knowledge and Word of God. How does Paul say to fight the good fight? In his words immediately before he said this, 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. "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone," Paul says in our Epistle reading. 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.

The One True God is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." The people of God are served well by following His example. Amen.