

“A Celebration of God’s Word”

Luke 8:4-15

Sermon for Sexagesima Sunday 2022; February 20, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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The readings from God’s word today focus on the word of God itself. Through the prophet Isaiah God says that His word that goes forth from His mouth shall not return to Him empty, but shall accomplish the purpose for which He sent it (Isa. 55:11). God’s word accomplishes things. And so the writer of Hebrews says that the “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, . . . able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12 NASB). In the parable of the sower, Jesus says that the seed is “the word of God” (Luke 8:11).

When Scripture talks about God’s word being living and active and accomplishing the purpose for which God sent it, we see that God gives His word to do things to us. God gives His word to change our minds, to inform and uplift us; to bring us to saving faith in Him, which is faith in Jesus, and to keep us in that faith. To put this differently, we could say that God gives His word to judge us, to interpret us, to give us life and hope; to convict, to forgive, to pronounce us righteous on account of Christ; to promise Christ’s victory over evil, sin, and death, so we can have hope and faith and courage in the face of those things. It is God’s intent to critique us. It is God’s intent to inspire us as it forgives our sins and tells us about God’s mighty deeds in the physical reality of our world in Christ in fulfillment of promise. It promises God’s faithfulness now and the life and joy of the world to come.

Since God’s word is living and active to accomplish His purposes with us, it brings about a certain posture of us toward God’s word. It is the posture of a child, drinking it all in to be taught and shaped in beliefs, morals, faith, and conduct. It is as God also says in Isaiah chapter 55: “Incline your ear and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (Isa. 55:3).

This is quite a contrast to a posture in which the reader or hearer of God’s word is supposed to be judge or critic. In this posture, it is supposed that when you hear God’s word written, spoken, read, taught, you are supposed to evaluate it first to determine whether you can consider it to be true and believe. The critical posture brings with it a relative scale of truth value: the word of God is just one assertion among others, and may not be the most reliable or most important one. You are the knowing critic. You are in charge and in control. You decide.

This posture is actually a worldview. It is the worldview of our time. We could take it into account when it comes to the parable of the sower. In the parable, Jesus talks about things that prevent the word of God from taking root and doing its work of faith and transformation in a person’s life, according to what God’s word says. So, Jesus talks about the devil who is always trying to snatch the word of God out of our hearts. Jesus talks about those who hear the word and initially receive it with joy. But when persecution, hardship, and testing come on account of the world, or we could say societal pressure, they give up on the word. He talks about those who hear and initially accept God’s word. But then when it comes into conflict with the pursuit of riches or pleasure, faith is choked. Such a person treats riches and pleasure as the highest good.

But how then would we talk when God’s word comes into conflict with the critical posture? For when God’s word comes into conflict with the critical posture, the critical posture demands that God’s word must be abandoned. What kind of farming imagery could we use here? How about this: when the seed sprouts and grows, the farmer comes through with a plow to plow

it under because it is not the right type of plant. Or how about this, when the seed sprouts and grows, it must be sprayed with weed killer because it isn't the right kind of plant. It must be treated like a weed. God's word does not produce the right kind of beliefs and values, so measures must be taken to make sure we get the right kinds of plants and fruit.

Taking account how God's word is intended to accomplish its purpose brings into focus just how important speech is. Speech is huge because it shapes beliefs, worldview, convictions, and values, whether it is God's word we are talking about, or some other word. This is a crucial fact of being human. Speech shapes belief and conduct.

The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul affirms this when he says that faith comes by hearing. He says further that Christian faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). Jesus said that "if you remain in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31).

God's word is speech, A promise from God in Christ is spoken word. The forgiveness of sins is spoken word. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is brought about by Christ through spoken word. A commandment from God is spoken word. The stories of God's mighty deeds of creation, of the Exodus from Egypt, of the story of Jesus Christ, are written and spoken word. They are speech. And these spoken words of God shape belief. They inform us about ourselves and our world. They forgive our sins and bring about communion with Christ. They inspire the mind and heart with faith in God. They inspire courage in the face of evil, and give hope in the face of death. They teach us how live in a way that God wants.

The devil and the world also know this about speech. So they want to control speech according to their agenda. The battle for minds and hearts is a battle for speech. It is a battle for the freedom of speech. When the world in its critical posture and its particular agendas comes into conflict with God's word, it must control speech.

What a chilling example of this is going on right now in Finland for all the world to see. This is taking place in the trial of Dr. Päivi Räsänen and Bishop of Juhana Pohjola of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland. They have been standing trial for simply affirming in writing the teaching of God's word regarding marriage and human sexuality. Dr. Räsänen is a member of the Finish Parliament. The Finish government has treated their speech about marriage and human sexuality as hate speech and agitating against other groups. Their speech does not conform to what the government wants, so their speech must be controlled pursuant to the government's agenda by prosecution and the threat of imprisonment. And Finland is supposed to be a liberal democracy.

And in our own country there are powerful forces trying to control speech, which is to say, trying to control thought, beliefs, and values. And what better way to control speech so as to promote an agenda in the joining together of government, education, big tech, corporate management, and the media.

God's word is speech. So God's word being able to do its work, implicates the freedom of speech. And so the pursuit of truth in the public square and accountability of government is about the freedom of speech. Since God is always on the side of the truth. In the church, let speech be according to the pattern of sound words (1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 1:13) and in a manner befitting the eighth commandment, as taught in the Small Catechism.

Of course, even when there is no freedom of speech, God's word will still do what it does. It will still be received and believed. And those who receive and believe it will hold fast to it in the power of the Spirit who gives the word, even if they have to suffer for it. And as it is received and believed, it will more and more create the posture of the child in us, as it also more and more

makes us wise to the ways of the world and the evil one. And in this reception and faith, it will inspire courage, love and true fear of God turned outward for pursuit of what is good. It will inspire faith, hope, and love, even as it tells us about Jesus and delivers to us the salvation He won through bitter suffering and pain and then through His wonderful resurrection from the dead.

So we thank God today for His word, by which He teaches us and brings us to Himself through Christ and in the Holy Spirit, as we look forward to the events of Holy Week involving Jesus. May His word accomplish its purposes among us always, bearing in us the fruit God wants us to bear. Amen.