

"Doers, Not Just Hearers"

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

Sunday, May 29, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28; Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24;
Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-28; Matthew 7:21-29

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Excuse me! Excuse me! Excuse me!" the weary traveler said as he approached a stranger outside the bus terminal. "Excuse me – can you tell me where I'll find Woodward Avenue?" "Ain't no Woodward Avenue here, buddy," was the reply.

The traveler turned to another passer by and stopped him and said, "Excuse me, can you direct me to Woodward Avenue?" The passer by stopped and wrinkled his brow and thought for a minute and said, "Sorry."

The traveler, getting exasperated and frustrated, went back into the bus terminal and began to ask people how he could get to Woodward Avenue, but nobody seemed to be able to tell him. Finally, finally when it was just too much, he stood in the middle of the bus terminal and called out, "Can anybody tell me how to get to Woodward Avenue? Doesn't anybody in Detroit know where Woodward Avenue is?" And in the shocked silence a voice replied, "Buddy – this is St. Louis. This ain't no Detroit." You can want to get to the destination, but you had better be on the right bus.

And that's what Jesus is talking about in the gospel I read to you this morning, which happens to be the conclusion to Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking very bluntly about the destination of those who seek to follow him. This morning's gospel is painful and frightening for us to listen to, because it's not directed to those outside these walls, it's directed to us, right here, as we hear them.

Jesus is speaking directly about the consequences of the choices we make; the outcome of our faithful actions or faithless non-actions. As much as we would like to cling to Paul's teaching (as we heard it read this morning that we're saved by faith), these terrifying words remind us of the words of James later in the New Testament – Faith without works is dead. It's like a house built on sand.

In other words, it's not just enough to believe, but one's belief needs to be seen in how one lives one's life. How far, we might ask ourselves this morning, how far will our faith take us? Are we ready to lay down our lives for Christ?

These words take on a stark reality this weekend, when we remember all those who have given their lives in the service of this country. And not only those who have paid what we so euphemistically call the ultimate sacrifice, but also those who live with loss of limbs, those who bear the physical marks of warfare on their bodies, and those who carry its crushing pain in their minds. For their sacrificial service we owe a great debt, and to their example we owe honor.

And herein lies the heart of the matter before us: those men and women made a choice. They chose to serve in the armed forces, and not just wear the uniform. They chose to be prepared to put themselves in harm's way, to risk their lives – hopefully for the sake of God, certainly for the sake of country. Quite frankly, they put their lives at risk for you and me. We might seek to dodge the bullet, but saying the administration sent them or a president sent them is not the truth. For do we not claim that government is of the people, for the people and by the people? The bottom line is, we sent them.

Now we might take today's text to be an opportunity to prophetically proclaim that decisions such as going to war in Iraq, that declaring a war on terrorism, are so mistaken and ill-conceived as to be nothing more than building a house on sand. But to do that would completely miss the point of this morning's gospel, because the gospel that I read to you this morning isn't interested in the government or the president or Washington's decisions. It has no comment to make in regard to Iraq or terrorists or those who support them. Alarming the gospel we hear this morning speaks directly to us, the core of the community of faith, those who would proclaim themselves believers in Christ.

Matthew gets our stomachs in a knot when he reports these terrifying words of Jesus. First he tells us that the judgment of the world doesn't begin outside the church with despots and dictators, with terrorists and warlords, with Israel, Iran or Iraq. The judgment on the last day, the gospel tells us, will begin inside the church, and not just with the ordinary people, but with the leaders, the bishops and pastors, the preachers and priests, the leaders of the laity, all who have been outstandingly successful in their work in the church. But have not gone far outside of it. These people, as the gospel points out, talk a good talk, but they don't walk the walk. Their actions ultimately do not demonstrate their belief, but rather their lack of it. Thus the judgment begins with those who have no excuse for not knowing what it means to be people of God.

Second, the one who pronounces this judgment is none other than Christ Himself. That's right. The same Jesus who sat at a table with sinners, the same Jesus who laid his hands on little children, the same Jesus who came to save his people from their sins – it's this Jesus who utters these condemning words because, at least in the gospel of Matthew, judgment and grace cannot be separated; they are both dimensions of what happens when God is active in the world. When we look at Jesus and how Jesus lives and acts, we see God relentlessly pursuing love and what that looks like in human life in the world. And Jesus is also a reminder, especially in this gospel, what happens when people presume upon such love. To receive God's grace, to publically confess one's belief in Christ, but to live and act like Christ in one's daily life, is to build on sand, and to be sent from the presence of Christ as evildoers. The words of judgment in this text are aimed at those of us who say that we believe but are not willing to act on that belief.

And finally, the gospel makes it perfectly clear that those being singled out for judgment have been both scrupulously and accomplished in their participation in the church. Did you hear it? Teachers, healers, miracle workers, prophets? The problem is, they haven't gone beyond the church, to bring God's compassion, love, grace and forgiveness into being in the world, and so they have failed to obey God's will and do God's work. What is God's will then, we ask with trembling voice, with faint heart, with shaking knee? God's will is what Matthew clearly laid out preceding this morning's gospel in the Sermon on the

Mount and what Micah had to say before that: ". . . what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

Talk is so cheap these days. Everyone has an opinion and everyone with an opinion believes their opinion is fact. Churches, church leaders and church members are all busy telling everybody else what to do to please God, and our politicians are captive to opinion polls and surveys and religious charlatans.

But faithful Christians, Christians only too painfully are aware that they are daily under judgment, do not have such luxury. They must act, if they are to live. For it's only as they risk to act in imitating the life of Christ that Christ will actually live in the world. For His way is the way, and that way is the way to the Father.

This text is a warning. There is still time before the judgment day. Let us, therefore, be doers, and not hearers of God's word. Christ calls us to live courageously, as courageously and obediently as those people who serve and have served in our armed forces. As we live and breathe, our country once again is at war, and men and women wearing the uniform of our nation, are giving life and limb, body and mind to that cause, and for your sake and mine. At such a time as this we should be chastened by the enormity of war and its impact on our minds and bodies and souls and faith. And we should be rededicating our lives to the service of Christ and neighbor. Let us live, then, as Christ would have us to live, acting brazenly and boldly in His name, living a life marked, not by belief or persuasion, but by our actions for and our obedience to Christ. All of which is so easily said and so painfully and difficultly done.

But there is hope. To my mind, it's a bit like the story of Theseus and Minotaur. The Minotaur, half bull and half man, was imprisoned in a labyrinth in Crete, and kept calm and fed each year by the human sacrifice of seven youths and seven maidens. One year Theseus, the greatest it might be argued, of the Greek heroes, said he was going to go to Crete and into the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur. He sailed to Crete and met Araiadne, the daughter of the king, and, you guessed it, they fell in love. Araiadne decided that she would help Theseus, but she knew that even a hero could get lost, even the greatest of Greek heroes would get lost in the winding passages of the labyrinth. So she gave him a ball of golden cord. "Unwind it as you go in, then you will be able to find your way out again by following the thread," she explained. So Theseus entered the dark, winding labyrinth, undoing the thread as he went, until he was at the center of the maze and face to face the monster. With great agility and skill, Theseus slew the beast and found his way out of the labyrinth, out of the maze, by using Araiadne's thread.

Our lives at this time and in this place, are labyrinthine. How are we to find our way through all this conflict and confusion and verbal cacophony? Let us follow the golden thread that God has given us in Christ. Come, let us gather round this table to pick up once again the golden cord of our salvation and go from this place courageously and boldly in the service of Christ, not wearing the cross, but living for it. Amen.