

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Jeremiah 28:5 - 9 (NIV)

⁵Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD. ⁶He said, "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon. ⁷Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: ⁸From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true."

Theme: What Are We Listening to?

The history of the Christian church is full of examples of men and women, who boldly confessed their faith in Jesus Christ, even when it meant death, suffering, hardship or sacrifice. A great example in the early church was a pastor named Polycarp. He was told to curse Christ or be burned at the stake. He answered, "**How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?**" In modern days there are Christians throughout the world who are threatened because of their faith in Christ. I was somewhat surprised that the country of Laos is one of the places with the greatest amount of persecution today. Government officials have labeled Christianity "the number one enemy of the state." Christians are being commanded to recant their faith or face losing their homes, land or jobs if they don't renounce their faith.

In the history of our Lutheran Church, there are also many examples of people who have boldly confessed Christ in the face of danger and hardship. Martin Luther stood before the emperor in 1521 and was told to recant of his teachings. He answered, "**My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.**" **Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.**" Nine years later on June 25, 1530 the Lutheran princes of Germany were summoned by the emperor to a diet in Augsburg. They were also told to recant of their Lutheran faith. They answered with a confession of their faith called the Augsburg Confession, which states our Lutheran teaching clearly. Their "Here I Stand" was "We believe, teach, and confess." Even the history of our Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod began when Lutherans were ordered to change their worship and beliefs in Germany, so they began to emigrate to places in the United States, such as St. Louis and Mequon. They gave up everything to move to a virgin forest, so that they could worship God freely.

All of those people were sure of what they believed. What about us today? Are we just as sure? Can we say, "Here I stand?" Do we know what we believe, teach, and confess?" The answer to our confession of Christ depends on what we are listening to.

I. It is tempting to listen to what we want.

I am afraid that Christianity in America today is far different from the examples which I just gave. Many of you probably heard the report from *Pew Research* this past week, which took a look at the spiritual beliefs of Americans. On the surface the report seemed to be good news. 92% of Americans

claim to believe in God, and 78% claim to be Christians. 39% of Americans claim to attend religious services every week. (I wonder how truthful that is by how many cars I see on the road on Sunday morning.) But already the first sentence of the report sounds a big warning about religion in America. It states, **“A major survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that most Americans have a non-dogmatic approach to faith.”** That means that the teaching of their religion means very little to most Americans. That is shown in what many people believe. For instance 57% of Protestants believe that people who don’t believe in Jesus will also be saved. 64% of Protestants and 77% of Catholics believe that there is more than one way to interpret the Bible. Only 33% of Americans claim that their Scriptures should be interpreted literally. One interesting statistic said that 52% of Christians rely on their experiences and common sense to determine what is right and wrong. Only 29% rely on their religious beliefs. While the Bible is the best-selling book in our country, 45% of Americans claim that they have seldom or never read it. One sociologist remarked about the study, **“Religion is 3,000 miles wide but it's only three inches deep”** in our country.

The American religious landscape today likes to talk about God and Jesus, but form our own opinions about God without really listening to the Bible. We claim to be religious, but that doesn’t mean that it influences our lives. That can be shown in things like how Baptists will often have their children baptized, Lutherans will receive the Lord’s Supper in churches that don’t teach the real presence. Or the most ironic part of that survey was that 21% of Atheists claimed that they believe that there is a personal God. Do we often find ourselves believing what we want to believe rather than what God’s Word says? Do we even know what the Bible says?

This is not very different from the time of Jeremiah. These verses speak of a false prophet named Hananiah. In 597 BC the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. They carried the king, the nobles (including Daniel and his companions), and the temple treasures to Babylon. Hananiah boldly proclaimed that both the people and the treasures would return within two years. The yoke of the king of Babylon would be broken. Jeremiah, however, had a different message. He told the king to serve the king of Babylon and not to listen to the false prophets such as Hananiah. He warned that if they rebelled, the entire city would become ruins. He told the exiles to also serve the king of Babylon and that it would be 70 years until they and their descendants would return. Guess whom the people listened to, Hananiah who proclaimed peace and prosperity or Jeremiah who proclaimed disaster? They listened to the false prophets. Because of it, the entire city was destroyed, and all the people were carried into exile in 587 BC.

That remains a lesson for us. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:3, *“To suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”* “We don’t seem to care what the Bible says anymore. We interpret it to say what we want it to say. Where has that gotten us? Our children don’t have any idea of what is right and wrong. They are often attacked by temptation with no idea of how dangerous it is. We want to hear that we are good, even when our deeds are sinful. We want self-esteem, not a Savior. When our confidence is in what we want to believe rather than what God has revealed to us in the Scriptures, we will lead ourselves to our own destruction just like Israel did.

II. There are great blessings in taking God's Word to heart.

That is shown in Jeremiah's message also. The section after our text is a letter that Jeremiah wrote to the exiles. He told them to marry, build homes, and settle down in the land of their exile. He promised that the Lord would bless them there. He also wrote, "*When 70 years completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."* The false prophets gave the people false hope. Jeremiah gave the people hope that came true. Those who listened to his words were blessed. 70 years later the exiles returned as he had said with great rejoicing.

It is also shown in the examples which I shared in my introduction. The Roman Empire tried as hard as it could to destroy Christianity. Yet, Christians held fast to their confession of Christ. Eventually the empire that tried to destroy Christianity became Christian. Persecuted Christians today know that the hope and future they have in Christ far outweighs everything they suffer. Luther and the confessors of the Augsburg Confession would not back down on their confession of the faith. Their faith continues to give people hope and peace in Christ today. The founders of our church gave up their homelands to worship freely. They made sure that their children were baptized and confirmed. Faith in Christ was passed on from generation to generation. It became the cornerstone of their lives for generations.

We are blessed today also when we hold firmly to that confession of Christ. We live in a sure confidence that God's Word is true, and every promise that He has made in Christ will be fulfilled. If He tells us that our sins are forgiven, they are forgiven. If we are going through very difficult times, we count on His Word, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Even when death comes calling, we know that just as Christ rose from the dead, so we will also rise to eternal life with Him. We also don't have to ponder what is right and wrong. God's Word tells us what is right and wrong. When we follow His commandments, we find out just how good His ways are and how blessed we are when we walk in them.

It is tempting to listen to what we want to hear and to believe what we want to believe. We might try to fit the Bible to our opinions. To put it bluntly, it's tempting to have a shallow faith in which we claim to believe in God, but we make God into what we want Him to be. On the other hand, it is a blessing when we make that confident confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. It gives us confidence in God's love and mercy throughout our lives and gives us the blessing of Him who died and rose for our salvation.

Amen.

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