

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 10, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
C: **Amen.**

Scripture Readings

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Seek the Lord and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,
O you who turn justice to wormwood
and cast down righteousness to the earth!
They hate him who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor him who speaks the truth.
Therefore because you trample on the poor
and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions
and how great are your sins —
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time,
for it is an evil time.

Seek good, and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.
Hate evil, and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Jude 1-4


Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Mark 10:17-22

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Hymn: LSB 915, *Today Your Mercy Calls Us*



1 To - day Your mer - cy calls us To wash a - way our sin.
2 To - day Your gate is o - pen, And all who en - ter in
3 To - day our Fa - ther calls us; His Ho - ly Spir - it waits;
4 O all - em - brac - ing Mer - cy, O ev - er - o - pen Door,

How - ev - er great our tres - pass, What - ev - er we have been,
Shall find a Fa - ther's wel - come And par - don for their sin.
His bless - ed an - gels gath - er A - round the heav'n - ly gates.
What should we do with - out You When heart and eye run o'er?

How - ev - er long from mer - cy Our hearts have turned a - way,
The past shall be for - got - ten, A pres - ent joy be giv'n,
No ques - tion will be asked us How of - ten we have come;
When all things seem a - gainst us, To drive us to de - spair,

Your pre - cious blood can wash us And make us clean to - day.
A fu - ture grace be prom - ised, A glo - rious crown in heav'n.
Al - though we oft have wan - dered, It is our Fa - ther's home.
We know one gate is o - pen, One ear will hear our prayer.

Sermon

The New Testament letter called Jude is, honestly, kind of a strange book. Despite being quite short -- it's only twenty-five verses, one of the shortest books in the Bible -- there's a lot about it that isn't very clear. We aren't positive who wrote it: the name "Jude" is basically a form of the name "Judah" or "Judas" which were pretty common back then. It could be the Jude who's mentioned once as a brother of Jesus, or Jude the apostle who's also called Thaddeus. Or possibly even another early believer named Jude. We just can't tell much from what we're given.

The content is kind of strange, too. It talks about some Old Testament stories and also mentions some Jewish legends that aren't even in the Old Testament. It almost sounds like the words of an Old Testament prophet too, talking about God's wrath against fallen angels and sinful men alike. But the central theme is what we see introduced here in these few verses: division and hypocrisy within the Church.

There are unbelievers outside the Church, Jude knows. He mentions those who are worldly and ungodly, but they are not the real problem for Christians. His attitude is basically this: of course ungodly people speak and act in ungodly ways! Why should you expect anything different? You

can't expect a non-Christian to act like a Christian. If those who do believe still struggle with sin so much, every day, how much more those who do not believe?

They aren't the real problem for the Church. The most they can do is make earthly life a little less pleasant, and as Jude sees, this is a temporary and relatively minor problem. God is going to take care of all that. There is punishment for sin, there is wrath for those who rebel against God, but God can and will take care of that and He specifically tells us, His people on earth, that it's not our job. Jude even approvingly quotes a legend about the archangel Michael, who does not presume to speak judgment against the devil himself! He merely uses the words, "The Lord rebuke you."

What a wonderful reminder for us, when our society is so deeply divided and so many Christians seem to have this mentality of being under siege. To many, and I would guess that includes some of you, a lot of the "powers that be" in our country appear unbelieving and anti-Christian. The kinds of things taught in colleges and schools, the people in positions of government power, the messages that come from media, the special interest groups that push acceptance and celebration of things the Bible forbids. Jude himself mentions Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed because of their sexual immorality and unnatural desire. Whatever they come up with, there is still nothing new under the sun. But whatever the case may be, in the midst of all of this I suspect that some of you feel like the world is going crazy, that we're under siege and have to somehow fight back.

And I would suggest, as Jude also did long ago, that that is not the real problem. That is not the real threat or conflict for the Church. Our God is a mighty fortress and nothing can overcome Him. It doesn't matter how hostile the world might be to Christian faith or Biblical living. Jesus tells us not to fear those who can only kill the body; only fear God who has power over body and soul. Jude dismisses this present fallen reality -- sinners are gonna sin. God is going to take care of it. The kingdom of Christ is not of this world; it has nothing to do with earthly power and influence.

"But you, beloved," Jude continues towards the end of the letter, "building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire." Have mercy on others, pray and be faithful, focus on the love of God, and love those who are in danger by "snatching them out of the fire," bringing them into the safe ark, the lifeboat of the Church. God will take care of the fighting back. You just show love and mercy.

Because we remember we're all in the same boat, every human being: shipwrecked and thrown into the water with only one possible lifeboat and means of rescue. That lifeboat is the Church, which Scripture compares with Noah's ark, to carry us safely through the troubles and storms of this world to the safety in God's new Creation on the other side. There's only one lifeboat, and all of us were equally plucked out of the flood waters. Have mercy on those who doubt, Jude says; have mercy on those who are hostile, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... Because "there but for the grace of God go I." That, but for the grace of God that has made us as this passage puts it "called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ," is us. It doesn't matter how hostile and hateful a person is towards Christianity, they deserve only our pity and love.

None of that is to say there isn't a real danger to the Church. There is, as Jude tells us. But the real danger comes from inside the Church, not from outside of it. He writes, "For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." There's nothing that outside unbelievers can do that can truly threaten the Church or Christians, not when we take the eternal perspective on things. But when there are unfaithful people within the Church, when the Gospel message gets compromised and twisted, when the truth of Scripture is clouded, that is what presents an eternal danger.

That's why heretics were executed in the Middle Ages: a murderer can only kill the body and end an earthly life that was already temporary and fleeting. A false teaching and distortion of the Christian truth can lead a person away from Christ and therefore deprive them of eternal life. A murderer kills a body; a heretic kills a soul. That was their logic, but of course, we as Lutherans don't believe in doing that; from the very beginning, even back in the 95 Theses Luther noted that burning heretics is contrary to the will of God. Violence and force are always contrary to the way the Church should operate. But there is a correct idea hidden in there: it's true that a spiritual threat is more serious than a physical threat. A distortion or loss of the Gospel message is more serious to the Church than any outside hostility.

It seems to me that a lot of the anger and worry among American Christians today is directed towards politicians or media figures, towards legal decisions or school curriculum, towards Big Tech or other corporations. Towards that, I would echo the sentiment of Jude: so what? Jesus and the apostles all warn us in Scripture, don't be surprised when that happens, when sinners act like sinners, when you face hostility from non-Christians for your faith. Don't be surprised and don't sweat it. In the long run, it's no big deal, and God will take care of putting everyone in their place and making sure they get what they deserve.

No, the real problem are when churches get it wrong, when churches do what Jude described, "pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." There are churches around us that sanction and promote sexual immorality or that deny that Jesus is the only Savior and only way to God. There are also churches that buy into conspiracy theories and promote fear and conflict over trust and peace in Christ. Some people pervert God's grace by using it as an excuse to do whatever they want and think "God will forgive me anyway, so it doesn't matter." Others pervert God's grace by using Scripture as a weapon against people they don't like, extending only judgment instead of love and mercy.

When others speak falsely and do it in the name of Jesus, that is what we ought to be concerned about. We often pride ourselves as Lutherans on being the church of the Reformation, but especially as we remember the Reformation during the anniversary month of October, we must remember that it is not just a single historical event. The Christian Church must always be reforming itself, always repenting when we find ourselves astray, always returning to our Lord Jesus and the reliable Word of God. We are always "contending for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

And yet, Jude starts his letter with an interesting comment: he'd rather be writing about salvation, but instead he has to write about contending for, struggling to preserve the teachings of the faith. I'd rather just be rejoicing with you about how wonderful Jesus is! But instead I have to try to fix these problems. It is important to address the problems that come up, but it's always better to simply rejoice in the good gifts of God. It's better for us, it's better for those around us, and it's better for the world to rejoice in God and in the good things than it is to worry about the bad. It seems to me that if we are truly doing that, if we are focusing on the things that are good and Godly, rejoicing in the gifts we receive in Christ, reflecting that love of God to all those around us in peace and mercy, compassion and righteousness, then as Jude wished his readers, "mercy, peace, and love" may indeed be multiplied to us.

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;**

give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.

P: Lord Jesus Christ, whose grace always precedes and follows us, help us to forsake all trust in earthly gain and to find in You our heavenly treasure; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: Amen.

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: Thanks be to God!

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: Amen.