

THE CHURCH'S PRIME DIRECTIVE IS FIRST THAT WE LOVE THE TRUTH, AND SECONDLY THAT WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Sermon for the 5th Sunday of Easter, 2021

1 John 4:1, 7

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 John 4, verses 1 and 7: **¹ Dearly loved people, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God! For many false prophets have gone out into the world... ⁷ Dearly loved people, let us love one another! For love comes from God, and everyone who loves has been given birth by God and knows God.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus calls us, and so, we must hear and heed His voice. Why? Because failing to do so would make us sheep without a shepherd, subject to getting lost or attacked and killed by wolves, or any other horrible thing that ends up happening to unguided and unprotected sheep. It only makes sense: if we desire to confess Christ, and want to keep on confessing Him, then we must keep on being led by the Good Shepherd. We must be fed, protected, and cared for *by Him*.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus spoke of Himself as the true Vine and we as the branches.¹ By this, Jesus meant to say that we have to be grafted into Him to continuously receive the life-giving nourishment that flows from Him to be alive and productive. A branch removed from the Vine soon withers and dies. It produces nothing and ends up getting thrown into the fire and burnt.

The living bond to Christ must be maintained, and it's precisely for this purpose that Christ has established His church on earth. It's to congregations of the faithful that Jesus calls us together into a living body to be fed and cared for. It is there where each Christian is connected to the true Vine. How? The spiritual power from heaven that connects lost sinners with their Saviour is invested in Word and Sacrament. Therefore, it is vital for us to understand that the church is not a human invention but has been created by the Lord for our good. And so, our participation in the church is not optional - not if we want to remain faithful and produce the fruit that God desires.

While the church is created and maintained by the Lord, it is run by human beings like you and me on a day-to-day basis. This is a huge responsibility that has been laid upon us – a responsibility we dare not take lightly, and all of us have a part in it. This is true wherever we are in the world because the *church exists in many different forms*. There are big congregations and little ones; all made up of different kinds of people. They have existed throughout the ages in different cultures and have faced various challenges, and today John gives us the Lord's own general operating principle for us in His church so that no matter where we are or what we're doing, we can be sure that if we stick to this basic rule, we'll be moving in the right direction. And here it is: *The Church's prime directive is first that we love the truth, and secondly, that we love one another*.

What does it mean to love the truth? Simple. It means that we cherish the Word of Christ and seek to hear it. But it's more than that. It also means that we protect it and endeavour to keep it whole and undefiled. This is why John enjoins us not simply to accept everything we hear without question but to carefully consider and weigh the words of our pastors and anyone else who claims to have a word from the Lord. He writes, **“Dearly loved people, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God!”**

It is fast becoming more fashionable to be tolerant. After all, who wants to be called intolerant? And yet, some spiritual teachings are deadly, for they lead many away from Christ and His cross. Here we have a dilemma for believers because there are many different denominations today claiming to be Christian - and there can be no doubt that there are true children of God found in these different Christian denominations. But the trouble confronting many today is this: If they wish to tune into God, then who do they listen to out of all the babble of voices claiming to speak

¹ John 15:1-8

for Him? Every believer in all times has to confront the same terrible problem - who is telling me the truth? How can I tell? To whom do I listen? And to make matters worse, Satan sees the Word of God for what it is - a deadly blow to his control of the people of the world. So he recruits and trains a counterforce of spiritual liars who seek to infiltrate the church and, knowingly or unknowingly, unravel God's truth. So subtle and crafty is the evil one that many of his agents actually think they are working for God. This is why each believer has the heavy responsibility to choose whom he or she will listen to.

These same questions were being asked in John's day. At the time of John there were those church leaders who were leading people astray by all sorts of false teachings. The result was that these church leaders were drawing people away from their Saviour. So John's advice to the believers then as it is now is to test them. How?

Well, since you can't read their minds or look into their hearts, listen to what they say. Listen to what the pastor teaches and also evaluate the confession of that particular congregation or church body. When Paul and Silas visited Berea, the believing Jews "*received the Word with all eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day*" (Acts 17:11). So, John also reminds us to examine the preached Word of God in the light of the whole testimony of Scripture. The appearance, style, buildings, personalities, and number of adherents in a church are all irrelevant. What is important is what is being taught and confessed.

Often today you will hear members of a Christian church say that we should not get too concerned about doctrinal purity, that it really doesn't matter that much. "*All you need are a few of the basics,*" they say. "*If you start getting into the finer points it will only lead to controversy and arguments, after all, don't we Christians all worship the same God?*" But let us ask the tough questions. Let's confront them and look for the answers and solutions in God's Word - that's where the truth is to be found. As a matter of fact, the word that John uses when he tells us to "**test the spirits**" is the one the Greeks used to describe the testing of metals to check them for impurities and contaminants. It implies a rigorous examination. That's what we want because it's precisely by subjecting what's being taught in the church to a rigorous standard that we can be sure that the truth is preserved, and impurities are removed.

This leads us to the second part, which is loving one another. John writes, "**Dearly loved people, let us love one another! For love comes from God, and everyone who loves has been given birth by God and knows God.**"

We can mention two things here. The first is that we have to get the sequence right. Our love for one another flows from our faith in God's truth. It's not possible to have godly love for each other *unless* we are living in God's love and forgiveness that come to us by His truth. Or, to say it another way, true Christian doctrine leads to true Christian love. Sometimes people try to do that backwards. They put love up front and say that that is all that matters, or they put love up front and say that it will lead us to the truth. It doesn't work that way. It's like saying the fruit can be produced before the branch is attached to the vine. It's not possible - though it is possible to fake it, and people often do. There are whole church bodies that claim to have love and tolerance for everyone but have pretty much thrown out every sense of Christian doctrine. These churches are friendly. They're inviting. They're open. But they aren't Christian. Neither are they truly loving because one thing the pastors of these churches will never do is warn sinners of the wrath of God and the coming judgment - and therefore their need for a Saviour in Jesus Christ. Instead, they lie and say God loves people just the way they are. There is no need to repent. There is no need to turn. There is no need to ask for forgiveness in Christ. Well, that's not love. That's insanity.

The second thing to mention is that it's possible to become so focused on seeking the truth and weeding out all heresy that our love for each other gets short changed. This happens when we fail to grasp that knowing the truth about the Lord is not the same as knowing the Lord *through* His truth. The first has to do with the accumulation of dead facts, figures, and theological concepts. The latter has to do with a living relationship that is established by spending time with Christ in His Word and receiving Him and His forgiveness in the Sacraments of the Church - and so truly coming to know Jesus and His love. We aren't here today just to learn about Jesus. No, we are here to *listen* to Jesus who speaks to us through His Word. We are here to have Him touch and heal our sin-sickened hearts. We are here to experience firsthand the love He has for us - that He displayed in giving up His life on the cross so that we could live with Him forever. We are here to have Him fill us with His Spirit to direct and guide us, precisely so that the love He has for us will become a part of us and influence our behaviour so that we willingly give up ourselves for one another - not as sacrifices for sin; but as living sacrifices that continue to care for and seek the good of each other.

This, then, is our prime directive: that we love the truth, and that we love one another. May our gracious Father in heaven cause us to keep it, that we may bear much fruit and prove to be Christ's disciples, and so bring glory to His name. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You have sent Jesus, Your holy Servant, into the world, not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life to redeem all people. After He had offered His life as the one sacrifice for all sins forever, You raised Him from the dead by Your glorious power. Give us a living faith in Him, so that we may possess the sure hope of eternal life through Him.

We thank You for all Your kindness in our lives. We praise You for every blessing that You give us, and that Your mercy is never-ending.

We thank You, O Father of all light, for taking away the darkness of our minds and spirits, and for revealing to us Your Word of truth in Jesus Christ. Pour out Your Spirit on us, that He may continually plant Your Word in our hearts. Increase our willingness to study the Scriptures, and our understanding of them.

We thank You for the fellowship of believers in Your church. Keep us all in the unity that the Spirit gives, and in the peace that binds your children together. Keep us in faith in Christ Jesus, in joyful obedience, and in loyalty to Your infallible Word. Bless Your church everywhere, protect it from all its enemies, and give it success in all the work that believers do in Jesus' name. We ask Your blessing to rest upon the AELC. Raise up pastors whose sole task is to proclaim Your saving message to the world.

We thank You for our Christian homes. Surround every family with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, that love, peace, forgiveness, comfort, joy, and moral purity may fill their lives.

We thank You, Lord, for the blessings that we enjoy in our rich land. Defend it, both within and without, from all who would harm it by sin, undermine it by strife and rebellion, or destroy it by war.

Strengthen the faith of those in our midst who are suffering illness, who are bereaved, and who are lonely, or depressed in any other ways.

We thank You for health and healing, education and social joys, friends and companions, and all the beauties and wonders of Your creation. Fill us with gratitude for Your goodness, and give us opportunities to use what You give us to serve you.

Surround us all with Your love, and finally receive us into perfect, unbroken fellowship with You and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Hear these prayers in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶ An angel of the Lord told Philip, "Get up and go southwards on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza!"

This is desert. ²⁷ He got up and went. A man from Ethiopia was there, a eunuch, who was a high official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was on his way home. He was sitting in his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go up to this chariot and stay close to it!"

³⁰ Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

³¹ He answered, "How could I, unless someone guided me?"

He invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² The passage of the Scripture that the man was reading was this: "He was led like a sheep to be slaughtered and, as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so He did not open His mouth. ³³ In His humiliation, His justice was taken away. Who will describe His descendants? For His life has been taken from the earth."

³⁴ The eunuch answered Philip, "I ask you, about whom is the prophet saying this, about himself or someone else?"

³⁵ Then Philip began to speak. He began from this passage of Scripture and told him the Good News about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were travelling down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look! Here is water. What is there to prevent me from being baptised?"

³⁸ He ordered the chariot to stop. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptised him. ³⁹ When they had come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord

caught Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again but went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ However, Philip was found at Ashdod. As he passed through all the cities, he kept telling the Good News, until he came to Caesarea.

1 John 4:1-21

¹ Dearly loved people, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God! For many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. ³ However, any spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and which is already now in the world. ⁴ You are from God, little children, and you have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world. That is why they speak from the viewpoint of the world and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God. He who knows God listens to us. He who is not from God does not listen to us. In this way we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

⁷ Dearly loved people, let us love one another! For love comes from God, and everyone who loves has been given birth by God and knows God. ⁸ The one who does not love has not known God, because God is Love. ⁹ This is how God has shown His love among us: He has sent His only Son into the world that we may live through Him. ¹⁰ This is what love is: not that we have loved God but that He has loved us and has sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dearly loved people, since that is how God has loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us, and His love has been brought to maturity in us. ¹³ This is how we know that we remain in Him and He in us: He has given us His Spirit. ¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son as the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him, and he remains in God. ¹⁶ We have also known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is Love, and he who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him.

¹⁷ His love has been brought to maturity with us in this, that we have confidence on the Day of Judgment, because we are like Him in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but mature love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment. The person who is afraid has not been brought to maturity in love. ¹⁹ We love because He first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a liar. For no one who fails to love his brother, whom he has seen, can love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹ This is also the Commandment that we have from Him, that he who loves God should also love his brother.

John 15:1-8

¹ "I am the true Vine, and My Father is the Gardener. ² He takes out every branch in Me that does not bear fruit and prunes every branch that bears fruit, that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in Me, and I shall remain in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you, unless you remain in Me. ⁵ I am the Vine. You are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit. For without Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in Me, he is thrown away like the branch and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burnt. ⁷ If you remain in Me, and My Words remain in you, ask for whatever you wish! It will be done for you. ⁸ By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and become My disciples.