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Jeremiah 23:16-29
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“Say, Who Said That?”

God’s grace and peace...

I spent this last week in Rome—surrounded by cathedrals and basilicas, relics and grand displays of a time when the church was the center of society. I went to Vatican, saw where Peter was buried, that was neat. Was rushed through the Sistine Chapel like cattle. It was interesting to see the church as an attraction point. People taking pictures of the structures and the design, the extravagance, but when it comes to the content, to the message, these buildings were just museums; things of the past, not of the present. How far we have come to today where the church is not at the center of society anymore. People used to form their opinions based on the church. But now, people form their views apart from the church and sometimes even against the church.

When we were in Rome just a few days ago, we took a taxi and we came across a church building at a roundabout, which is not hard to do—they are everywhere. And it was quiet, but the taxi driver took it upon himself to comment, even translating via Google, “I do not care for this church. They never pay their taxes. They don’t pay.” I know it’s a different system set up there than here, but the sentiment is a common one: “Why shouldn’t the church pay?”

Well, it's one of those benefits as a 501c3. I'm wondering if the church has said something other or something less than, because it didn't want to lose its 501 c3 status. Can you see that as a concern going forward? I'll just say, a church that doesn't speak the Word of God has lost something far more valuable than their tax status. We have to speak truth, we have to move forward the message of God, even if it's not popular, just as the prophets did.

In Jeremiah's day, as now, some prophets were easier to listen to than others. I don't know about you, but if I had my own choice, I would want someone telling me all is well, all the time. I would never want to be confronted with my own faults or told that I needed to change my ways. I would just want to be told how amazing I am and how everything is going to be just peachy. You can always find a "prophet" or a church to tell you those things, even if they aren't true. They exist!

How God laments the empty words and dreams of the false prophets. They may have been popular and well-received in their day, but on the Last Day, it's going to be rough for them. Why? Because they prophesied "the deceit of their own heart" (v. 26). They put forward their own dreams, not the word of YHWH.

But a true prophet just tells it like it is. It doesn't matter what the people think of it. They are only there to put forward the word of the Lord. They aren't

in it for themselves. In fact, if it were up to them, the true prophets would just as rather not proclaim the truth, because most of the time it didn't help with their popularity. Always telling the people to repent—yeah, that goes over well with the marketing department! And in even the good news and future hope they proclaimed had seemed so out of place with the current situation. But the true prophet always tells people what God is saying.

As I go about preaching, one of the things I consider in preaching is, “Am I telling the people what they want to hear, or what they need to hear?” What are you listening for? We listen for the Word because it's the only thing worth listening for. Jokes and stories help, but it is sad to consider what passes for a sermon in many pulpits across our nation, a people void of the Word, Gospel-deficient, a truly non-prophet church, that refuses to put the real Jesus front and center, a church that takes a cut and paste, or white-out approach to the Scriptures. That kind of church can have all the money in the bank and still be broke.

We simply need more Word in us—Word that is not conformed to us, but Word that conforms us to it. Here's a quote from the Large Catechism, *“Therefore you must constantly keep God's word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil*

breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living” (Large Catechism, 101).

The Word never fails—living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, God-breathed, the word of the Lord endures forever. These are big claims the Word makes about itself. So how do we show that in our actions?

I’ve really been trying to make a habit of the first thing I do in the morning is getting some Word in me. I have my Bible on my phone, but rather than read the news, or check my e-mail which is something that’s so easy to do, I first read a chapter of something from the four Gospels—the red letters. I scroll somewhere in the Gospels. And I know there are better ways and more disciplined and intentional ways to do it, but at the same time, it’s kind of fun to see where it ends up. And so I read a chapter—which is not a lot. But the point is, to get something in you first thing. In fact, I call this “first word”. We want to give God the first word of the day. I can tell the difference between when I have first word, and when I don’t.

I used to be of the belief that it didn't matter when you did your devotions and private time with God because not everyone is a morning person. But there's great value in getting the Word in first, because that way, I can live the events of the day with something in me, guiding me and renewing my mind. As the Large Catechism says, *"It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds."* Having first word helps with our discipleship. And we've read it before. But here's a quote for you. "I can't imagine a man really enjoying a book and reading it only once." Say, who said that? CS Lewis.

The Word is so powerful that God says, "Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29). Not only is the Word powerful, it's also bigger than we think. If I were to ask you, "What is the Word of God?" you would probably say the Bible. And you'd be right. But there's more to the Word than just the Bible.

One of my professors at the seminary, Dr. Biermann, explained this one day. He wrote up on the white board "Word of God = Bible". And then he crossed out the equal sign with a big X. And at that point, thinking this is grounds for dismissal from the faculty, he joked, "Does anyone want to take a picture of this?" I said, "Yeah, but lean in first so I can get you in the shot!" And then he

replaced the equal sign with a “greater than” sign. So it read, the Word of God > Bible. He explained, in our theology the Word is everything. It’s where the power is, it’s where the authority is and not one whit beyond it should we every stray. But it’s a mistake to reduce the Word to just the Bible, as an amazing as a gift to the church that it is. The Bible is the written Word. But there’s also the spoken or preached Word. In a sermon, God uses this time and occasion to speak directly to you. Sometimes it’s a miss or we’re distracted. But sometimes, He gets at things in your life that I had absolutely no idea about. Or this spoken Word can occur in conversation among with other believers. That’s the Spirit. So there’s the written Word, the spoken Word, the sung Word. How many times does a song just get right at it? Then there’s another form of Word—the visible Word. This is the Sacraments. In baptism, the water is Word-drenched. In communion, we always recall to the Words of Institution. Why? Because the power is always in the Word.

A true prophet knows how to handle God’s Word. However it comes: the written Word, the spoken Word, the visible Word, the point is to get it in you. And then when it’s in there, God always uses it to accomplish His purpose—to awaken or strengthen faith, to comfort, to admonish, to praise, to reassure—

there's just something deeply satisfying about clean hearts and minds in that moment. Read it again. Speak it again. Sing it again. Believe it again.

I want us to be known as a church that believes the Word, proclaims the Word. When people drive by, they may not agree, they may have their own opinions on all kinds of issues, but if they were to take a look, I would want them to see a church that enjoys knowing and living out the Word that God has given us by spending time in it every day. We don't make the Word. It makes us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.