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The Treasure of the Church

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This month's homiletical helps constitute the conclusion of a series of sermon studies for the current church year based on a set of texts originally selected for the 1842 edition of the Perikopenbuch of the Evangelical Church in the Province of Saxony. Studies on these texts were prepared by faculty members at colleges and seminaries associated with The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. The studies in this issue are the work of three members of the faculty of Concordia Teachers College, Seward, Nebraska: President W. Theophil Janzow (the 25th Sunday After Trinity) and Professors Erwin J. Kolb (the 26th Sunday After Trinity) and Walter L. Rosin (the 27th Sunday After Trinity).

THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

MATTHEW 13:47-50

Introductory thoughts

Some of man's most powerful lessons have been taught in picture language:

1. Aesop's fables — e. g., the dog, the meat, the reflection in the lake;
2. Shakespeare's plays — e. g., the pound of flesh in the *Merchant of Venice*;
3. Churchill's prose — e. g., "the iron curtain."

Our text is one of Jesus' famous parables. It presents a powerful picture, and its lesson is clear.

The Parable of the Dragnet is the last of seven parables in Matthew 13. They seem to have been spoken on the same day, some from a boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee and some in a nearby house (perhaps in Capernaum). They all refer to some aspect of Christ's rule among men, either His rule of grace, through the Gospel, or His rule of glory, with special reference to its visible manifestations on Judgment Day. The phrase "kingdom of heaven" is used eight times.

The text is fitting for this season, one of

the last Sundays in the Trinity cycle, when the emphasis is largely eschatological and we are thinking about what is variously called "the last time" (1 John 2:18), "the latter day" (Job 19:25), "judgment of the great day" (Jude 6), "end of the world." (Matt. 28:20)

In the parable Jesus uses the picture of a net and its catch. As a fisherman finally separates the good catch from the bad, so God's angels will separate the people who have been caught in one way or another by the net of Christ's rule on earth.

The Dragnet and Its Catch

I. *A Net That Catches Without Separating*

A. It reaches people of every kind.

The text says that the net gathered in of every kind. The Old Testament church had its suicide-committing Saul (1 Sam. 31:4) as well as its sweet-singing David (psalms of David); its Moabitess who married a Hebrew husband (Ruth) as well as its Jewess who married a Gentile king (Esther).

The ministry of Jesus drew the rich (Nicodemus) and the poor (John 9:8); respected citizens (the rich ruler — Luke 18:18) and notorious sinners (the adulterous woman — John 8:11); an intimate group of disciples that included Judas as well as Peter, James, and John.

Peter's Pentecost-Day audience included at least 14 different nationalities (Acts 2:9-11). Our cities have this many and more. Should not our congregations look equally varied, each one having members from every class, race, nationality, and economic, political, or social groupings? What colorful congregations this would make! Would this make us uncomfortable? It should make us glad (1 Tim. 2:4), because our churches should be the company of the redeemed, regardless of lineage or background.

B. It is not exclusive in its reach.

The text: Before God there is only one important difference: wicked or just.

"Just" cannot mean by human merits (Rom. 3:20). It can only refer to those who are just by faith. (Rom. 1:17)

"Wicked" cannot refer to sinners *per se*. All for whom Christ died are sinners (Rom. 5:8). It must refer to unrepentant sinners. (Mark 16:16)

Both are caught by the "net" and are in the church. Who can tell the difference? Not man! The curtain that divides the wicked from the just is an invisible veil.

What a mistake to try to establish an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*! This is the reverse of what Jesus warned against in the Parable of the Tares among the Wheat (Matt. 13:24-30) but with similar results.

Church discipline and excommunication are, of course, not ruled out, remembering that their real purpose is to keep people in, not to cast them out.

Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, p. 77: "We would be spoiling God's plan of salvation if we were to organize a great 'Operation throw-them-out,' if we were to cast out of the temple the hangers-on, the hypocrites, the border-liners, and all the other wobblers of Christendom, in order to keep a small elite of saints. For this would mean that we would rob these people of the chance at least to hear the word and take it to heart. This would be to slam the door of the Father's house in their faces — and we would become a sect. But the very reason why Jesus died was to open the Father's house to everybody, including the superficial, the indifferent, the mockers, and the revilers. The bells of invitation which sound over the marketplace, fields, and alleys would be silenced, and the comforting promise, 'Everybody can come, just as you are,' would be turned into a questionnaire in which everybody would have to list his accomplishments and merits, and finally somebody else would add them up

and evaluate them and give the verdict: 'You passed' or 'You failed.'"

C. It consists in the declaration of God's grace and God's judgment.

Every large organization has an image. What is today's popular image of the church's task? To build an organization of "nice" people? To provide recreation for the young? To provide opportunity for good business contacts?

The church's task is to proclaim Christ from the housetops (Luke 12:3), to preach deliverance to the world (Luke 4:18-19), to declare the word of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19), to invite everyone who thirsts to come to the waters. (Isaiah 55:1)

The Gradual reminds us of the joyous nature of this message and of the church which proclaims it: "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God." (Ps. 46:4)

The church also has a less pleasant but just as necessary task: to announce judgment upon anyone who rejects this wonderful grace. This word is only the repetition of Christ's word: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3)

The important thing is to fit the message to man's need: Law for the hardened sinner, Gospel for the worried, grief-stricken sinner. Most congregational situations require both simultaneously.

How wise is God not to give us the job of making the separation here in time. We would become obsessed with "keeping our houses clean." Instead we can direct our major energies toward the primary task, proclaiming the message to the end that we might "by all means save some." (1 Cor. 9:22)

II. *A Net Whose Catch Is Separated When the Catching Time Is Done*

A. The catching time ends on the Final Judgment Day.

Fishing was a major industry along the

Sea of Galilee. The making and repairing of nets was a common household chore. The method of using nets was well understood. Nets drawn through the water caught whatever came in their path. When the sweep was finished, the net was drawn out of the water. On the shore the things that were useful were kept; the unwanted things — bad fish, debris, other sea objects — were thrown away. Catching time was over; separation time had come.

Judgment Day ends God's spiritual catching season. Opportunity is over —

1. as it was for Israel when Nebuchadnezzar invaded with his conquering army. (Jer. 8:20)
2. as it was for the foolish virgins when they returned for oil. (Matt. 25:10)
3. as it was for Jerusalem when it rejected Christ. (Luke 19:42)

"Opportunity knocks only once" may be true in temporal affairs. A World War II historian claims that in 1940 England was virtually defenseless. Hitler could have had it for the taking. He decided to postpone the invasion. Later the invasion was impossible, and Hitler lost the war.

God gives the individual many opportunities (Matt. 23:37; the thief on the cross). Only divine grace could be so patient. But even with God there is an end: the Final Judgment.

1. Death is judgment for most. (Heb. 9:27)
2. Some will be alive and judged on the Last Day. (The Epistle: 1 Thess. 4:13-18)
3. All will be given a public hearing then. (Next Sunday's Gospel: Matt. 25:31-46)

People should not be deceived by God's patience. Story: A farmer told his neighbor: "I missed church every Sunday during planting season, and here it is September and I have the best crops I ever had." The neigh-

bor replied: "God does not always settle His accounts in September."

B. The criteria for separation are simple.

The Christian religion is profound enough for the most advanced student of theology. (See Rom. 11:33.)

The judgment, however, will be simple:

— Do you or do you not believe? (Mark 16:16)

— Did you or did you not show fruits of faith? (Matt. 7:20)

— Are you among the wicked or the just? (Text)

C. Our concern is to be "among the just."

What concerns most people today? Vance Packard says status (*The Status Seekers*). Whyte says organizational security (*The Organization Man*). Former Harvard professor Timothy Leary wants it to be LSD, a hallucinatory drug. Wendell Philips says: "Education is the only interest worthy of the deep and controlling anxiety of the mind of man." Numerous surveys show that people are thinking less and less about salvation and eternity and more and more about jobs, promotions, homes, cars, social security, and the like.

The Judgment reminds us: God is the greatest value (The First Commandment). Don't delay. "While He may be found" (Is. 55:6). Keep your priorities straight. "Seek first the Kingdom." (Matt. 6:33)

III. *A Net That Holds Important Lessons for Its Catch*

A. The fate of the wicked is indescribably miserable

Text: "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." To be cast out of God's presence is total misery. It is portrayed as: "torment" (Luke 16:24), "no rest day or night" (Rev. 14:11), "eternal fire." (Mark 9:44)

No wonder watchfulness is the watchword. "Be sober, be vigilant" (1 Peter 5:8). See also the Gospel: Matt. 24:15-28.

B. The prospect for the believer is glorious.

Judgment Day means that the time for the full inheritance has come. (1 Peter 1:4)

All the blessings of heaven are bestowed. (Rev. 22:1-5)

C. We should be courageous and confident.

The Introit stresses that the church's major response to God's message is confidence and trust.

The Epistle (1 Thess. 4:13-18) "Comfort one another with these words."

Conclusion

How appropriate the Collect: Almighty God, deal not with us after the severity of Thy judgment, but according to Thy mercy, through Jesus Christ.

W. THEOPHIL JANZOW

THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

REVELATION 3:15-17

Introduction

Suppose that instead of the sermon this morning I would give you an evaluation sheet asking you to evaluate your Christian life. You have on this sheet, drawn from the Ten Commandments, items like these:

Commandment 1 — God is more important to me than my job. I trust God's care more than my own ability.

Commandment 2 — I use God's name only to praise and pray. I talk to God in my thoughts a hundred times a day.

Commandment 3 — I would rather go to church than go fishing, golfing, or to a football game. I read my Bible several times every week. I regularly talk to others about my faith.

Commandment 7 — I use all my money in a way that pleases God. I give a generous proportion of my income to church and charity. I serve my church with the ability and opportunity I have.

And so on. In your imagination how did you rate yourself? Where are most of your check marks? On *Failed*? I doubt it — or you wouldn't be here. Are they on *Passionate*? Very few of them. "I don't want to be a fanatic," some say. Most of your checks are on the average, *Passing*. Not too bad, not too good, just average.

Jesus did this with a church in Laodicea. The three items on His checklist were: *cold*, *hot*, and *lukewarm*. His conclusion was, "If you are lukewarm I will reject you, like spitting lukewarm, sickening liquid out of My mouth."

I. Why Worry About Judgment?

A. Judgment comes to all.

The closing Sundays of the church year keep reminding us that Christ will return as He went into heaven. He will come with all His angels, in all His majesty and power — and He will judge the world.

The Gospel (Matt. 25:31-46) pictures the judgment as the dividing of the sheep and the goats, casting into the fire of hell and taking to heaven.

The Epistle (2 Peter 3:3-14) speaks of the heavens and earth "stored up for fire." "The day of the Lord will come like a thief."

The Introit is a cry from Psalm 54 to save me "in the face of judgment." St. Paul says, "Every one of us shall give account of himself to God." (Rom. 14:12)

B. The judgment is based on works.

The judgment scene in the Gospel (Matt. 25:31-46) is based on the clothing of the naked, visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, going to those in prison. Jesus speaks of giving account for every idle word. (Matt. 12:36)

We are the children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, but the evidence of that faith is works — otherwise it is dead faith (James 2:17). Jesus kept emphasizing in His preaching that "by their fruits you shall know them."

C. God makes the evaluation!

The Gradual speaks bluntly: "God is Judge." The words of the text are spoken by the Christ who is "The Amen, . . . the beginning of God's creation" (v. 14). He says to the Laodiceans and to the other churches in Asia Minor addressed in chs. 1—3: "I know your works." The Laodiceans could not make an honest evaluation. They thought all was well, but Jesus tells them of their real condition. (3:17-18)

Background

Laodicea was a wealthy city, the center of banking arrangements for Asia Minor, where Cicero, traveling in the East in 51 B.C., cashed his letters of credit. It even refused federal support from Rome after an earthquake because it was able to rebuild itself. (Cf. v. 17.)

Laodicea was an industrial center. Three great roads crossed it. Black-wooled sheep provided the raw material for its garment industry. One of the tunics it made was called the *trimita* which was so famous that Laodicea was sometimes called *Trimitaria*. (Cf. v. 18.)

Laodicea was a medical center. It had a medical school and was famous for ointment for the eyes and ears. (Cf. v. 18.)

The church at Laodicea was one of the oldest in Asia Minor, with its companion churches at Colossae and Hierapolis. Ephras was one of its early leaders. (Col. 4: 12-13)

(Background information based on William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* [New York: Abingdon], pp. 90—95.)

II. *Who Is Passing?*

A. You who do the right thing for the wrong reason.

This month you will raise your pledge a little. You are proud of your church and wouldn't let it down. You want others to know you are doing what is right; you want to feel right in your own heart. WHY?

B. You who are satisfied and need nothing.

You never cry over your sins nor rejoice in forgiveness. You have all you need physically and spiritually. You take life as it comes and don't get too excited about anything.

Dr. Erich Fromm, speaking at the 43d meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association in April 1966, said: "Theologians and philosophers have been saying for a century that God is dead, but what we confront now is the possibility that man is dead, transformed into a thing, a producer, a consumer, an idolator of other things. . . . A man sits in front of a bad television program and does not know that he is bored; he reads of Vietcong casualties in the newspaper and does not recall the teachings of religion; he learns the dangers of nuclear holocaust and does not feel fear; he joins the rat race of commerce where personal worth is measured in terms of market values, and is not aware of his anxiety." (*Pastoral Psychology*, June 1966, p. 57)

C. You who are doctrinally pure but fail in love.

Of the seven churches, this is the only one that has nothing which the Lord of the church can commend. No false doctrine, no errors, no evil, nor any gross sins; just lukewarm in a way that is sickening.

D. The warning is clear.

God wants us to be not "passing" but "passionate." To be passing is to fail. To be lukewarm is worse than being cold. The world and the Christians know where the cold one stands. His witness is clear. But who can know the "lukewarm"? Yet God still loves and calls to repentance (v. 19). He still stands at the door and knocks. (V. 20)

III. *What Is Meant by Being Passionate?*

A. It is buying what God offers.

V. 18 offers the remedy: "Buy of Me." God offers all that is needed to remedy the

wretched condition of the Laodiceans — gold for their beggarly condition, robes for the nakedness, and eye salve for their blindness. The picturesque language may be related to the description of the city above — a city where there is wealth, a garment industry, and medical specialists for the eyes. It is intended to say, "Come and get what I have to give you. It will solve your real problem, help you to see yourself for what you are, cover your sins with the righteousness of Christ, and make you rich in the grace of God." Buying is thus taking by the power of the Spirit what God freely gives, the atonement accomplished on the cross.

Is. 55:1 echoes similarly, "Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Rev. 7:14 picks up the picture of the robes "washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb."

B. It is being "hot" with zeal for the Kingdom.

The Epistle says, "Be zealous." Apollos is described as being "fervent in spirit" (Acts 18:25). It involves feeling contrite and knowing the joy of forgiveness. It means being filled and controlled with love and enthusiasm for the Kingdom. "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit." (Rom. 12:11)

Passing or passionate? May our prayer be that of the Collect: "O God, so rule and govern our hearts and minds by Thy Holy Spirit that, being ever mindful of the end of all things and the day of Thy just Judgment, we may be stirred up to holiness of living here and dwell with Thee forever hereafter."
ERWIN J. KOLB

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY REVELATION 21:5-7

The Context

These verses fall into the last section (chs. 20—22) of the Book of Revelation and

are preceded by that portion dealing with the binding of Satan and the free spread of the Gospel. This is followed by the period of tribulation before the end (ch. 20:1-10). The period culminates in judgment and the appearance of the new heaven and the new earth. Our text occurs at this point and is in turn followed by the announcement of the marriage of the bride and the Lamb and a description of the holy city.

Thought of the Day

The propers for this last Sunday of the church year are to a large extent devoted to the purpose of offering comfort and encouragement. The Introit, identical with that of the Twenty-third Sunday, is taken from Jer. 29:11-14 and deals with the promise to Israel of a return after the Exile. The thoughts of God for His people are of peace, not of evil. He will not be a judge for them but a bringer of peace. The enthroned Lord welcomes the worshiper with the joyful message of an exile nearing an end. There is a longing for home, heaven, and those whose names are written in the Book of Life hear this encouragement. The Epistle (1 Thess. 5:1-11) and Gospel (Matt. 25:1-13) both seem to have the chief characteristic of warning. Yet, the Epistle closes with the thought that God has not destined us for wrath but for salvation, and it must be remembered that the five wise virgins did enter into the joy of the marriage feast. The Gradual, speaking of the marriage of the King and of the bride and the Lamb, also contains a note of joy. Revelation, from which our text is taken, is addressed to people who are experiencing persecution and need the assurance of God's love and their final victory. The text on which the sermon for this day is based provides it.

Introduction

Work sometimes becomes long and hard, and the worker often finds it difficult to keep up his enthusiasm as the day wears on. Yet it is amazing how a new spark of life can

enter the worker when he sees the end of the working day approaching. The thought of going home to a good meal and everything else that goes with "home" can pep him up.

The student who sees the end of an academic year or vacation time approaching is revitalized. He will soon be going home, where he will not have the same classes, assignments, and deadlines to meet day after day.

The serviceman may find his tour of duty either dangerous or boring. But the thought of a leave in order to spend a few days with his family keeps him going.

Going home — at the end of another church year this thought, found in the Introit and implied in our text, should also be uppermost in the mind of the Christian.

Going Home

I. GOING HOME, *the Christian is not relieved of his present duties.*

A. He has been given a task to accomplish: the task of "conquering."

1. The people originally addressed lived in a pagan environment with its temptations. They were to live the Christian life within it. So are we. Recall the similar temptations which confront us today.

2. The people who were originally addressed were to oppose evil. So are we. The warnings and direction in the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 1—3 are still needed today.

3. They were to create a thirst for the forgiving love of God in Christ and were to bring the message of forgiveness, which would quench that thirst. So are we. "Preach the Gospel to the whole creation."

B. His task is filled with difficulty.

1. Evil seems to be in control. Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? It has always been so — Israel in Egypt; Christianity in the early Christian centuries; the church in a secular age in the 20th century.

2. Even in times of prosperity and relative ease for the church, there is often no real joy. There is a weariness with things, even for the Christian. There is a dullness of routine that attacks and erodes the joy of the Christian life.

3. There is difficulty in retaining his own thirst for the things of God when so many things in the world seem to offer a means to satisfy any thirst for the good life. (In their appeal, advertisements capitalize on their ability to appear to satisfy the desires of man.) (Text, v. 6)

4. Weariness and sameness are factors which make perseverance difficult. In carrying out the immediate task the Christian too often loses sight of the ultimate goal. He forgets that all things have been made new. (Text, v. 5)

5. Failure to remember who he is (a son, an heir; text, v.7) makes the task more difficult. "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be" (1 John 3:2). God is making all things new. We are in an "already but not yet" situation. (The word *kainos* has eschatological overtones which reach down into the present; text, v. 5.)

II. *The thought of GOING HOME gives the Christian new zeal in his present task.*

A. There is no weariness or sameness. "I make all things new" — new heaven, new earth, new life (no death), new type of existence (no sorrow). The experience is impossible to describe (2 Cor. 12:4). People often detract from the wonder of this by failing to remember that heaven is described in anthropomorphic terms. Going home means a total renovation of life for the Christian. (Text, v. 5)

B. There at home is the fountain of the water of life, Christ Himself (John 4: 13-14). He is the one who satisfies our thirst forever. (Text, v. 6)

C. There is the inheritance which will be

his (text, v. 7). "Come . . . inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matt. 25:34)

D. There is his Father-God (text, v. 7b). Through faith in Jesus Christ he has been adopted into the family of God (Gal. 3:26-27). The perfect father-child relationship, which was there "in the beginning," was destroyed by sin, and for the Christian is still imperfect because of his sinful nature, will be completely restored.

III. *The certainty of GOING HOME is absolute.*

A. It is absolutely certain because in the midst of evil the enthroned God is in control of all things. The words are spoken by the One who is faithful and true, the One who sits upon the throne. His rule and reign have been established.

B. It is absolutely certain because the enthroned God is alpha and omega. He is the creator and consummator of all things. He is the Christ who is the beginning, the course, and the end of all history (Rom. 11:36). (The same designation is applied to God in the Old Testament [Is. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12].

The God who spoke the first word also speaks the last. He has already spoken it in Christ [Heb. 1:1-2]. The covenant which God made with His people has been fulfilled in Christ.) The crucified but risen and victorious Christ is Lord of all.

Conclusion

While *Going Home*, the thought of home makes each new day an adventure for the Christian. As a prince of God (the enthroned God says he will be His son), it brings him closer to the time when he will receive his inheritance. Involved in the war against evil and with a mission of conquering the world for his Savior, he is absolutely certain that he will be going home. In the death and resurrection of Christ the decisive battle has already been fought and won. Only the mopping-up operation is now taking place. Keeping this in mind he lives his Christian life joyfully and courageously whether at the close of an old church year, the beginning of a new one, or somewhere in between. He knows he is going home where Father God and redeemed son and daughter will never be separated again.

W. L. ROSIN