Homily for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. “He who has ears let him hear.” That’s a good a place as any to begin our sermon. Our Lord speaks this imperative in our Gospel lesson this morning. He says it frequently throughout the Gospels, in fact. You hear it a lot. It is almost a catchphrase of sorts. I believe it is the most common of all the phrases He uses. But do not think for a moment that this saying is supposed to be some figurative language or rhetorical device on our Lord’s part. It is not figurative or rhetorical in the least but is meant to be taken as quite literal. Remember, St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.” This is vital for us Lutherans. Faith is worked through the five senses. It is an empirical phenomenon. It is not just a feeling, an inner spirituality, a therapeutic religiosity, or whatever other new age regurgitation of what is essentially no more than an ancient and serpentine enthusiasm, as Martin Luther himself puts it. Rather, faith comes to us from without, from outside of us, and it comes particularly through hearing, through the ears, foremost. The content of the faith must be heard or at least perceived in some way. That is why it is so crucial, dear friends, that you are here this morning. Now I’m sure you know people who outwardly profess the Christian faith but who moreover argue that they have no need to come to church. Their faith, so they say, is between them and God. They don’t need organized, institutional religion and the weekly gathering of the faithful. Their spirituality is presumably above all that. Well, I’m sorry to have to be so blunt and the bearer of bad news, but: no, that isn’t even remotely right. Actually, it is altogether wrong.

The faith only happens here, within the walls or the very bosom of the holy Christian church, and in the midst of those listening with their ears elsewhere to what is being taught, preached, and delivered in this place.

The faith is birthed here in Holy Baptism, it is reared and reinforced here through the proclamation from the pulpit and by our Lord’s own body and blood – all of which are based around the words of Christ being spoken, audibly conveyed, articulated in common language. God’s command spoken along with the waters of Holy Baptism. The Words of Institution spoken over the elements of bread and wine. Faith comes by hearing what is spoken, full stop. And you have to be here to hear, be it either physically or at least electronically. And thanks be to God that y’all are here today. That is significant and a significant place to start.

 Now, in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus relays a familiar parable – that of the sower. Christ was resting at the shore of a lake, we are told, when a crowd gathered round Him on all sides. So He instead took to a boat, rowed it out onto the lake, and then began to preach to the multitudes on the shore from the vessel. And He shared with them this parable: “A sower went out to sow,” Jesus says. “And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. But still other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.” Our lectionary section today does not pick this part up, but after the telling of this parable, according to St. Matthew, the disciples, somewhat confused by what they’d just heard, they ask the Lord for clarity. “Why, Master, do you choose to speak in parables and seeming riddles? they inquire. “What’s the point.” And Jesus answers them: “*This* is why I speak to [the crowds] in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” This much was prophesied centuries ago, as our Lord notes.

Still perplexed though, the disciples wonder: “Well, Teacher, what does that even mean and what exactly are you trying to say with this strange agrarian parable you just relayed?” And our Lord, ever patient and obliging, goes on to explain.

He more or less says this: “That seed which falls along the path is what is heard but never quite understood. It is that faith the devil destroys before it ever even gets the chance to find any soil to begin to grow. As for what is sown on rocky ground, this refers to that seed which does find some soil yet never manages to take firm root. This is when the faith is received but quickly relinquished, out of fear of persecution or punishment, discomfort or discomposure, and the way of suffering the faith naturally entails. What is sown among the thorns, however, is the faith received and rooted, but soon choked out by the love of mammon and the other luxuries of this fallen world. But then there is the seed sown on good, hospitable soil which yields much fruit, grain even a hundredfold. This is the faith nourished and propagated among the elect.”

 Brothers and sisters, here is the sad reality though. Most folks fall into those first three categories in our Lord’s parable. The fruit-yielding seed, the fourth and final category, it represents but a remnant. To be clear, the seed in this parable is the Word of God, both Christ incarnate as the Word as well as the written Word, inspired and preserved by the Holy Spirit, which is steadfastly delivered from the pulpit. But the predominance of people today, they prefer a different word, don’t they? The world which sleeps in on Sunday morning prefers a more relaxed, less demanding word. A word that sounds nicer to the ears and more convenient at the end of the day, but one which on the Last Day will ultimately be emptied of all meaning, all comfort and consolation. And some, most unfortunately, they even prefer an outright ugly word, they favor a word composed of filth and admitted meaninglessness, a black pill, as the kids these days say; they privilege the offense of nihilism, sheer hopelessness, over against the beauty of truth and tradition. They would sooner have hedonism than heaven. Whatever it is though, the world removed from the faith, removed from the church and her walls, is indisputably ruled by the god of this world, the evil one, who snatches away souls before the good Word is ever really heard and truly understood.

So that is the seed cast along the path. But what about the seed cast on rocky ground. Well, how many people do you know personally who were once baptized into the name of the Triune God, dutifully reared in the faith, but who have not darkened the door of a church in years? They perhaps were confirmed, had made a public confession of their belief, and yet currently live as if none of that ever mattered. Their faith, having taken little root, has been since scorched by the sun, by the heat of the tension between the Word of God and the false philosophies of this crooked age. “The faith is bigoted,” they might argue – which you all’ve perhaps been unlucky enough to have heard. Or “all you backwards, unthinking Christians are nothing but hypocrites,” a recognizable refrain. Or whatever politically correct mantra they likely learned at university. All these are merely the sounds of the sun beating down countless degrees of heat on the faith of a wandering spirit until it withers. And it is entirely heartbreaking. It breaks my heart. It really does. I speak from experience with some nearest to me. But their faith now, I’m afraid to say, it is in name only. Considering all that, dear faithful, I must urge you: take catechesis seriously. Take catechizing your children in a deathly serious way. I, their pastor, will see them once or twice a week, I hope. But you are with them every day. It is your responsibility to prevent them from falling away.

Fathers especially, read the Bible with your children. Bring them to church often. Teach them why it matters to be here and why they ought to be wary of the world. You want to be a good provider, right? Then provide for their eternal wellbeing. Do your best whenever you can. It is in God’s hands, of course. And if your best happens to fail, then don’t you ever beat yourself up over it either. The Holy Spirit works faith, not you. So don’t you dare dwell or brood on it, that’s only hubris and pride speaking. Having said that, I do beg you: don’t take this undertaking lightly. Save your children. As St. Paul tells St. Timothy, by keeping a close watch on the teaching, the doctrine, by standing firm in the faith and in the Word of God, you will save both yourself and those who hear you. This applies to pastors, to be sure. But above all, I believe it applies to fathers with their sons and daughters.

St. Paul furthermore says in our lesson from Romans today that by the Spirit of God we receive adoption as sons and are thereby able to call our God “Abba, Father, Daddy.” A name connoting a profound and then countercultural intimacy with the divine. You each have a loving Father in heaven. You need Him unfailingly. Do you not? And so your children, they likewise need you, dear fathers. They need you to point them to their Heavenly Father. That said, tend to them. Be their shepherds, as I know you will.

 And then, friends, there is the seed sown on good soil but nonetheless among the thorns and the thistles. And here is the most unsettling part of the message this morning. This part of the parable, it may even apply to some within the holy Christian church in our midst. I pray that’s not so. And perhaps it isn’t. But listen well, little flock: where exactly are you in this parable. Who are you? Make no mistake, this parable is about you. It is about me. We are within its narrative. But where do we fall in it? Is there something in your life that chokes out your faith? Is it mammon, as Jesus suggests? Is it love of the holy dollar and avarice? Is it the delights of the flesh and self-indulgence? Is it the coveted attention of others? Is it work or sports, excuses or entertainment? Is it fear? Laziness? Indifference or callous unconcern? Do you put anything before the faith in your life? Do you privilege the Word or do you privilege the world? Be honest with yourself. For the end of the age is approaching, but it is not here just yet. We pray daily for our Lord’s return, but He is not here just yet. You are still living and breathing. It is not too late to turn from evil. The seed of your faith has been sown in good soil. In the Word and the Sacraments. And the truth is, every patch of green earth is going to have some thorn and thistle. Even the good soil in our parable has a choking weed here and there. But the question is, will those little weeds, those tiny thorns and thistles, suffocate your faith? Or will your faith persevere and persist?

All that to say, do not continue in sin, beloved. But repent and believe. Confess and be forgiven. The Lord of the Harvest will eventually return. And He will judge us according to the fruit, the grain, we yield. Do you still wrestle with this or that sin? I wouldn’t be surprised. So do I – constantly. This or that sin. All the time.

But that is precisely why your faith needs regular nourishing, here in this place, that it may therethrough carry you unto the end, that you may fight the good fight, keep the faith, and finish the race. That’s why you must keep coming back here. Keep coming to hear the Word of Christ, by which faith is created and then sustained. If the Word convicts you of your sin, if you hear yourself in the parable in an unexpected and unhappy way or if you feel yourself accused by the words of the law preached, then repent, turn from your sin and be reconciled to your God. I exhort you in this, as *your* shepherd, that you would do so. Yet I also know that, like me, you will continue to struggle even after repentance. You will persist in hurting your neighbor, yourself, and your God. That will not cease this side of the grave. Not entirely. But your Lord, trust that He has already paid the price for every last failure, former and future. He has already covered every single sin with His suffering and death. It’s all been done and atoned for. As He Himself said from atop an instrument of torture and execution: “It is finished.” Believe Him. All you must do is confess and receive the gracious forgiveness He purchased long ago on a cross.

He will heal you. It may be a long recovery. It probably will be. But He will heal you. In fact, He is presently healing you. He’s already hard at work. He is nourishing your faith. Friends, He quite literally waters your faith weekly with His very own blood, in the meal of this most blessed Sacrament. He once shed His blood for you and for your forgiveness, and now He rains it generously upon you here. The Seed of the woman foretold in Genesis chapter three found His foreordained soil in a borrowed tomb. He was buried deep below. Yet on the third day, new life nevertheless sprang forth. Everlasting life. And He gives that life to you freely. So repent and believe. It is that effortless and uncomplicated. He who has ears, let him hear, and he who has a tongue and eyes, let him taste and see. Your God waits for you here at this altar. Your faith needs His body and blood. The mystery of this meal will make you strong in time. So don’t neglect it or belittle its meaning.

To be quite honest, brothers and sisters, this is, in many ways, a rather sorrowful Gospel reading. It is sad that so much seed is seemingly wasted, that so few yield fruit. But again, faith comes by hearing. Maybe for many, the faith they once heard was seed cast on infertile or inhospitable soil. This stands to reason, however much a shame it is. But here’s the thing, there is nothing stopping us from casting more and more seed. And that, I think, is part of the point of our Lord’s parable this morning. Keep on casting. The more seed scattered and strewn, the more likely it is faith will eventually sprout forth somewhere. No one outside these walls is a lost cause. As far as we are concerned, not a single soul. Not one. Christ bled out for them all. Therefore, keep sharing the Gospel with them. Keep speaking it to them. Whenever you have the opportunity. They need to hear it to be brought or ushered home to the saving faith. And if you don’t have the opportunity, then make it.

I personally have been called to preach, teach, and administer the Sacraments to you in this place. And in that calling there is the obvious expectation of hopefully growing the church. We desperately require it. But that is not solely my responsibility. That is something we each bear. Does it wound and main your heart that someone you love immensely has cast aside the Christian faith? If so, then use that pain and heartbreak. Let it give you power and purpose. Sublimate that suffering, dear saints. Do not give up on those loved ones. The Holy Spirt works faith, this is most certainly true. But God works through means, too – and you are each one of His means. Keep casting seed. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. The ravenous birds may well fly elsewhere, the thorns, thistles, and weeds may happen to dwindle, and the sun may ease off its blistering heat. Who knows. But there is still time. That we do know. So let us never take for granted what little time there is. Keep sowing the seed, dear faithful. And the Lord of the Harvest will reward you and reward you greatly when He does return. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.