

FOLLOW YOUR HEART ... NOT!

Jeremiah 23:16-29

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

August 14, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson comes from the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 23, verses 16 through 29. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. Jeremiah 23, beginning at verse 16, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷ They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.' "

¹⁸ For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD
to see and to hear his word,
or who has paid attention to his word and listened?

¹⁹ Behold, the storm of the LORD!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.

²⁰ The anger of the LORD will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished
the intents of his heart.
In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

²¹ "I did not send the prophets,
yet they ran;
I did not speak to them,
yet they prophesied.

²² But if they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have turned them from their evil way,
and from the evil of their deeds.

²³ "Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? ²⁴ Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD. ²⁵ I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' ²⁶ How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷ who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? ²⁸ Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. ²⁹ Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

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Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have a question for you this morning. And I want you to think about it honestly. It might seem like a dangerous question, but I want you to think about it honestly. And before too long, you'll see where I'm going with it.

Here's your dangerous question for the day: *What do you not like about the Christian faith?* Or to ask it another way, *What commandment or what teaching do you just not like? What story from the Bible bothers you? What do you not like about the Christian faith?*

If your answer is "nothing," you are probably lying. Or maybe you're not thinking hard enough. Or maybe you just don't know the Christian faith well enough. Or it may be that, instead of believing the true Christian faith, you've created your own version, which consists only of those things that you like. Every human being, assuming they know at least a little bit about the Christian faith, will find something, probably several things, that they do not like. If you can't come up with anything, something's wrong.

Now I'm not saying this is good. We should like everything God has spoken, but we don't. And the reason for this is our sinful natures. We are by nature hostile to God. And our sinful natures lead us to sin. That is, we think, say, and do things that are contrary to God's good and gracious will. And one of the ways we sin against God is that we hate the things he has spoken to us.

Sometimes our rebellion is quite obvious to us. That is, we recognize that what God commands is good, but we just don't like it. Other times, and this is what we're going to focus on this morning, we don't even recognize that we are being rebellious. That is, we actually think we are right, and God's Word is wrong. So we hear something from God's Word, and we think, *Well, that can't actually mean what it sounds like it's saying.* Or we flat out reject that God even said that thing we don't like. It doesn't sound like something the god in our imaginations would say. And we think the god in our imaginations is the true God, so we reject the Word of the true God in favor of the god of our imaginations. The most dangerous part is that we don't even know we are doing this. To our minds, it just seems like we are believing the things that sound right or that seem to make sense. In this way, we create our own imaginary gods in our own image.

One of the ways to diagnose this is to examine our own beliefs and whether or not we like them all. Do we like everything we believe? If the answer is "yes," that is an almost certain sign that we are not believing the truth. And you don't even have to be a Christian for this test to work. You can be a complete atheist, and this test still works, because it's based on logic. If you like everything you believe, it reveals that your beliefs come from your own heart, and not from anything outside of you. If you never come to the point with something where you say, "Well, I don't like it, but it's true, so I have to believe it" ... If you never come to that point, then the only source of authority you recognize is your own heart, and you almost certainly doom yourself to being wrong. So if you like everything you believe, it is an almost certain sign that you are believing lies, probably several of them.

In this Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah teaches us not to follow our hearts. Jeremiah was a true prophet, and he said things people did not like. Furthermore, he called out the false prophets for telling the people what they wanted to hear.

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Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’ ”

Through the prophet Jeremiah, the LORD condemned these false prophets, because they taught the people to follow their hearts. This sounds really familiar. The motto for our current era of history could very well be, “Follow your heart.” But this is nothing new. The false prophets in Jeremiah’s day were saying the same thing.

Jeremiah is a fascinating figure in the Old Testament. What really stands out concerning him is that he was willing to suffer for the Word of the LORD. The king was against him. The priests were against him. And the other prophets were against him. Jeremiah knew that his message was unwanted. He knew people would hate him for what he had to say. He knew they would reject him. But he was compelled to speak the truth. He had been given the Word of the LORD, and the LORD commanded him to prophesy. So Jeremiah did it, no matter the consequence.

In order to best understand Jeremiah, we need to understand his historical context. So we’re going to hop in our way back Old Testament machine and set it to about 600 BC. Jeremiah prophesied from about 628 to 580 BC. This was a very bad time in Israel’s history.

About a hundred years earlier, the northern tribes of Israel had been conquered by Assyria and dispersed around the world. This was God’s act of judgment for their rebellion. So only the two southern tribes remained. This southern kingdom went by the name “Judah.”

But during the ministry of Jeremiah, the kings of Judah also turned evil, and they led the nation away from the LORD more than any of the evil kings before them. So the LORD used the nation of Babylon as his instrument of discipline. In 586 BC, the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, including the temple. The leaders of the Jews and all the holy objects from the temple were carried away to Babylon, where they remained in exile for seventy years.

Prior to this destruction, Jeremiah was calling the people of Judah to repentance. So he was always at odds with the leaders of the Jews. In this text, we see his struggle against the other so-called prophets.

These false prophets spoke visions of their own minds instead of the Word of the LORD. To those who despised the Word of the LORD, they said, “It shall be well with you.” This was a lie, but it’s what the people wanted to hear, so the false prophets prospered. To those who followed their own hearts, they said, “No disaster shall come upon you.” Again, this is what the people wanted to hear, so the false prophets prospered.

That’s the thing with false doctrine; people like it. And when you’re following your own heart, wouldn’t you like a prophet of God to say, “Good for you.” Then you don’t have to change your ways for anything. You don’t have to repent. You never have to confess your depravity.

This sounds a lot like the religious landscape of our world today. We often hear pastors, especially the famous ones, talking about their dreams and visions. But in Jeremiah, there is a great contrast between visions and dreams on one hand and the Word of the LORD on the other hand. Concerning those who prophesied visions and dreams, Jeremiah says they “prophecy the deceit of their own heart” (23:26). Their visions and dreams are not from the LORD, but from their own hearts. They are following their own hearts, which means they are following the corruption within. He calls dreams “straw,” but he calls his Word “wheat.”

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Now I'm not completely opposed to dreams. There are visions and dreams in the Bible that come from the LORD. He used them to speak to his people. But as the history of the Bible progressed, and as the written Word of God increased in volume, the frequency of dreams decreased. There was more reliance on the written Word of God. And today we rely even less on dreams. And we especially do not look to dreams for doctrine.

Occasionally I hear stories, sometimes firsthand and sometimes secondhand, of people seeing a vision or hearing an audible voice speaking to them. But these visions don't teach them a different doctrine, and they don't tell them to follow their heart. Rather, they point them to Jesus, and they point them to the Word of God. Here's the thing with dreams and visions: if it's just for you, and if it points you to Christ and to his Word, that's great. But when a vision or dream is used to teach a new doctrine, or elevate the person with the dream, or tell other people what to do, that's when we should be skeptical.

We should be cautious and even skeptical, because our hearts are evil. My heart is evil. Your heart is evil. We love it when people say to us, "Follow your heart. Chase your dreams. Your heart is good. God can't be mad at you for just following your heart." This is pure evil, and it is pure deception. Our hearts are depraved, and they lead us into death.

So when the Word of God comes along, bringing truth, there are going to be things we don't like. And we need to recognize that the problem is not with the Word of God. The problem is with us.

So what is it about the Christian faith that you don't like? I'm going to open several cans of worms here, and I'm not going to try to put any of them back. If something bothers you, I would love to hear your perspective, so please give me a call. But at least for now, I'm not going to try to put any of the worms back, because the point is for all of us to recognize that there are things God has spoken that we don't like.

For some it has to do with the Ten Commandments. Maybe you don't like the First Commandment. You might think that all religions are the same and people can worship any other god they choose. Maybe it's the Fourth Commandment. You don't see the need to honor your parents or other authorities. Maybe it's the Sixth Commandment. You think you are free to practice your sexuality however you want. You reject God's truth that sex binds a husband and wife together for life, and we cannot break this bond. Or you reject God's design for sex that it creates children. This leads us back to the Fifth Commandment. You may reject the truth that all human beings are created in the image of God, regardless of size, color, or intellect. God values every human life, and we have no right to kill an innocent human being. This includes unborn children. Maybe you don't like the Eighth Commandment. You feel free to talk about people behind their backs. You feel justified in putting the worst construction on what others say and do, especially if they're from the other party. God calls that "bearing false witness." That's just a few of the commandments. We could go on.

But let's move from commandments to doctrines. Maybe you don't like the doctrine that God created the entire world by his powerful Word. Maybe you don't like the teaching that God created male and female in his image. This means there are only two genders, and we don't have the ability to change them. Maybe you don't like the doctrine of the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Those things might just seem too miraculous. Maybe you don't like the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, because that implies you have a problem. Maybe you don't like the doctrine of Baptism, because it means the effectiveness of your faith is not dependent on your own understanding. Maybe you don't like the doctrine of hell, because that just makes God

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seem mean. Maybe you don't like the doctrine of Jesus' Second Coming, because you're in love with this world.

There may also be Bible stories you don't like. Maybe you don't like the stories of the flood or Sodom and Gomorrah. Maybe you don't like the story of Abraham nearly sacrificing his son. Maybe you don't like the story of God using the evil nation of Babylon to discipline his people. The people in Jeremiah's day certainly didn't like it. Or, to go a different direction, maybe you don't like the story of Jesus' crucifixion. You may not like the teaching that God actually died or that the Father condemned sin in the flesh of his Son. Maybe you don't like that the thief on the cross was given complete forgiveness when he deserved death, and he even admitted it.

That's a lot of cans of worms. And please forgive me for any cans I forgot to open. There has to be something in there that you don't like. Now if there's something there that you don't like, but you believe it anyway, well then you're on the right track. But if you simply reject those things that you don't like, if you say, "That's not part of my Christianity," if you're unwilling to accept something you don't like, then you're following the deceit of your own heart, and the end of that road is destruction. And you might hate me for saying it, and I'm a little apprehensive to say it, but it's true. If you only believe those things that you like, then you're following your own heart instead of the Word of the Lord, and the end of that road is destruction.

So what's the point of all this? We need to recognize that when we don't like something God says, the problem is not with God. The problem is with us. It's our own deceitful hearts. And we can say, "Okay. I don't really like this thing, or it makes me uncomfortable, but you said it, and you are God."

And even if we don't understand something, we confess that what God has spoken is really for our good. We think especially of his commandments. We might rebel against his commandments, but when we look at all the brokenness, shame, and death in the world, it's not hard to see how so much of it is the direct result of breaking one or more of the Ten Commandments.

And we confess these things as sins. When we don't like what God has spoken, that's a sin. And the primary point of identifying sin is so that we can confess it and receive forgiveness. God's will is not to leave us in our sins, but to forgive us and cleanse us. And so he promises, before we even confess our sin, what his answer will be. God is even compassionate toward those who hate him and who hate his Word. That, after all, is who Jesus bled and died for. He prayed for the souls of those who crucified him. And all of us were by nature children of wrath and hostile to God. If you discover that you hate God, you're not alone. The entire human race hates God. But God was merciful to us in Jesus Christ. So if you examine your heart, and you find that you hate what God has said, or you hate the God who is revealed in the Bible, do not run from him. Do not hide from him. You cannot hide from him. He fills heaven and earth. And even if you hate him, he does not hate you. He loves you, and his good and gracious will is to save you. In fact, he has already done the work to save you. All of your sin, including your hatred for God and your hatred for his Word has been paid for by Jesus. Those are the very sins he bore in his body, so that he can heal you and set you free. Whether you like it or not, it's true. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.