

Words That Carry Us Through Difficult Times
Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: John 5:39-47



You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life. ⁴¹I do not receive glory from people. ⁴²But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. ⁴³I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. ⁴⁴How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. ⁴⁷But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?

“The first casualty when war comes is truth!” This sentence was said for the first time by an American senator during the First World War. Throughout the course of history, it is true that falsehood is always a part of war. You could also say that the spread of distrust and the fragmentation of society is a precursor of open warfare. These developments in society don’t leave us indifferent. They influence us in our personal lives so that more and more people not only lose trust in institutions but also lose trust in one another. Many ask themselves: “Who can I still believe? Who can I still trust?” A few years ago, a distressed mother came to me and said: “My child is stealing. What did I do wrong?” When you can no longer trust or believe your own family, it is very distressing at first. Can you believe what your spouse says? Who do I actually believe, I mean besides myself? Or can’t I even believe myself? Another person says: “I caught myself lying to my best friend! What an untrustworthy person I am!” What happens if you can’t even believe yourself? What or who can you still rely on?

In order to be able to trust, people rely on two possible authorities. For example, you can say: “I trust only my own heart! What feels good, that must be right!” The other group says the exact opposite: “No! You need to have hard evidence. I can’t do anything without proof!” Is there a third path? First let’s look at the heart. Is it a reliable authority? Can we rely on our emotions? Allow me to introduce you to a man who lived under the authority of his heart, his name was Augustine, a well-known Church father. Augustine was a very talented young man. He held political speeches and taught the philosophical thinking of his time. He drank in the teachings of Plato, Cicero, and Seneca and could memorize long quotes from these philosophers. Alongside the philosophers, there were also sorcerers, fortune tellers, and soothsayers. The whole world was at young Augustine’s feet and he was able to make use of the various religious and philosophical trends and indulge in them. He was someone who listened entirely to his heart. Yet it wasn’t enough for him. With a few friends, he finally made an attempt to leave society altogether and form a communal community. The fact that women were unwilling to participate ultimately prevented Augustine and his friends from leaving society. Yet Augustine remained unhappy. His mother, Monica, introduced him to Christianity. Just one thing kept him from Christianity. “If I serve the Christian’s God, I must place my own glory behind God’s glory” he said disappointed and turned away from Christianity. Augustine wanted to be his own master, but he was never happy. Following the heart feels good. The pains and the joys that we experience in our hearts prove to us that we are alive. But the heart has a flaw – you can never rely on it. It has led many people astray. Jesus talks to us about this: One will come after Me who will testify of himself. He will speak from his own heart and people will believe him. One appeared in the Arabian desert. He also listened to his heart and spoke from the innermost part of his heart. Out of the confusion of his heart, he wrote something down and, in the end, he said: “God said so!” The consequences were catastrophic, one war after another was started. The heart of Mohammad still holds people under its spell to this day. No, the heart cannot be trusted.

Because the heart is so unreliable, some other people go in the opposite direction. “Nonsense,” they say. You can’t rely on such a fickle thing like feelings. Whoever wants something from life, must rely on concrete facts. Jesus spoke with such people. These people relied entirely on Moses and the Old Testament. They also tried to stay faithful to everything that the Old Testament stipulated. Under no circumstances should they step out of line, they thought. The only problem with this is that they didn’t understand God’s Word as God’s call to them personally, but as an authority that they could interpret, with which they could have wonderful theological discussions, and with which they could even manipulate others. These people didn’t understand God’s Word as a call and claim to themselves. They didn’t place themselves under the Word of God, instead they put the Word of God under their own way of thinking. That’s why they never even realized that the Old Testament itself had an open ending. No matter what the subject is, the Old Testament always ends with an open question. For example, when talking about the Promised Land, every Israelite was painfully aware that the land God had promised had not yet been given because Israel remained a poor little country amongst the turmoil of political events. If it was about a king, they all asked, “Where then is this king of justice who brings peace?”

When it came to the Ten Commandments, the Israelites knew it too – the Ten Commandments bring life and security. But who can keep the Ten Commandments and live according to them? Then there was the Temple where they made sacrifices for their sins. But the prophets already clearly showed that the Temple with all the sacrifices couldn't pay for the peoples' sins. Who would bring an effective sacrifice? Because of this open question, some Israelites looked longingly towards the future: when would it get better? But others entrenched themselves even deeper behind thousands of regulations and commandments. Don't stand out, just do what the rules say. These people have hidden behind the laws and not only that, they also put down others who couldn't put on such a good "show."

In the midst of this situation, Jesus speaks, and He shows us that there is a third authority in addition to the influence of emotions and facts. This third authority is God Himself. God Himself speaks, He speaks through His Word and consequently uses apostles and prophets who speak His Word. God also uses our emotions, but what's more important than anything is that He Himself speaks. Jesus reproached the Pharisees. They had certainly read God's Word and searched the Scriptures. But they didn't recognize the living God. In the midst of this situation, God explains that God is much closer than we think He is. But the truly wonderful thing is that Jesus isn't just close to us but He also makes His way to us and finds us. Again and again we see how Jesus Christ makes His way to the people of that time – He came to the pharisees, who were looking for Him in the Scriptures, and presented Himself as the Messiah of whom the Scriptures spoke; He also came to Zacchaeus who hid himself in a tree; Jesus also found His way to doubting Thomas, showing Thomas the nail marks in His hands; Jesus even found His way to Saul who was on his way to kill Christians and when the scales dropped from Paul's eyes, it was suddenly clear to him: I have now died to the Law, now I live only for Christ. That's how it is with our Lord Jesus Christ. He finds His way to us despite ourselves. The only question is whether we then recognize Him as such. Sometimes we don't recognize Him precisely because He has come too close to us. The people in Jesus' day thought similarly. They saw Jesus the person and thought, because He is so near and similar to us, He can't have anything to say to us about God. But that's exactly how it is. God comes so close to us that we often don't recognize Him. Today, Jesus came close to us through the Bible. The Bible can be found in almost every language and society worldwide. In recent decades, commentators have gone to great lengths to prove that this Bible is just a product of human imagination. But in doing so, a great mistake was made. The conclusion was drawn that the Word of God must be unreliable because it is human. It can be said another way – because God has come so close to us and revealed Himself in our flesh and blood and in our words, we can't see and believe Him. Just like Jesus' contemporaries back then, we do this still today. We don't recognize God because He is so close to us. Many people ask about God and long for faith. They want to know who they can believe. But many people have forgotten how close Christ truly is to us. Now I'll tell you what happened to the young Augustine. He was completely lost in his own heart. Deeply depressed, he brooded to himself. His heart had completely devastated him and he had reached the end of his rope. Then he saw a child playfully singing in the street. In the song, Augustine constantly heard the words: "Take and read... take and read." All at once, he recognized God's voice through the child. He took the Bible that he probably got from his mother and started to read it. At once, his eyes were opened and he also found his way to Christ. Then Augustine could also say: "My heart is restless until it finds rest in God." Up to this point, he thought that if he became a Christian, he would have to give up his life. Then he learned that he would only gain life through Christ.

Dear Congregation, Christ also finds His way to us. He wants to talk to us today and take our lives into His hands. This coming week, the pastors of the SELK (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany) will meet around God's Word. It is already clear that not all pastors and not all congregations agree on what Scripture tells us about ordaining women. What will we do in this situation? Perhaps a good dose of humility would be appropriate for us and the realization that we are not united in everything and that we don't know everything. Yet it is the Lord of the Church who is calling us. The child sang it to Augustine: "Take and read." Jesus and God are as close to us as the dusty Bible on the shelf. We long for a voice that is far above our existence and our living space. Yet God's voice is much closer, it is in our midst. Just as Paul would later write: "The Word is near you... that is, the Word of faith that we proclaim." (Romans 10:8) Amen.