

Easter 7 – May 16, 2021

Text: 1 John 5:9-15

Theme: We Like Fake News (Ille Dilexit Ecclesiam)

Our Epistle for today is from St. John's first letter to his churches in Asia Minor where the heresy of Gnosticism was beginning to spread. Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge. The Gnostics taught that one must have some kind of secret knowledge of the divine in order to be saved, and that the material world was evil. Thus, they denied that God took on human flesh in Jesus Christ or that Jesus was truly human. Of course, this teaching flew in the face of all the facts and testimony of many witnesses. People who knew Jesus, knew that he was human in every way. They saw him eat, drink, sleep, laugh, cry and die. The information that the Gnostics were spreading was what we call today, "fake news." They spread such notions because Jesus did not fit into what they wanted religion to be.

See, "fake news," like all sin, is not a modern invention. If you just repeat a lie loud enough and long enough, eventually some people will believe it and start to disseminate it. Many pastors have had their ministries destroyed with this very tactic. Spread enough rumors about a pastor and then when called upon for proof, just say, "Hey, where there's smoke, there's usually fire." There's been nothing but inuendo, and yet there are some people, often enough people, who will accept the premise to join in against the

pastor. The only fact is that someone has blown smoke, smoke of their own creation, and attributed it to the pastor. "Fake news," also know as gossip, is a very successful strategy if you want to get rid of someone in a trusted position. It works in the Church, in schools, in politics. It works in just about any service-related industry.

The Gnostics, believing that the physical body was evil and that the soul was all that was of importance, needed to get rid of the physical man Jesus. They could not abide by people worshipping him as God. The idea that God became human ruined their whole theological system. Like most people who like to gossip, they did not really care about the truth, and they certainly had no intention of admitting that they were wrong. So, they began selling fake news, which even continues to this day with the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses which are both types of Gnostics.

Note St. John's words to his people and to us. "If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son." It is pretty cut and dried. Either you believe what God has

clearly revealed in his Word or you try to twist that Word to make it say what you want it to say. That's why the Jehovah's Witnesses have to translate the Gospel according to John in a way that no reliable translator has ever translated it. They say "the Word was 'a' god," instead of "the Word was God." That's why the Mormons have to rely on secret golden plates discovered in a cave and only interpretable by Joseph Smith. They have to import things into the Scriptures to get them to say what they want them to say instead of believing the testimony of God. They make God a liar.

We could whip the Gnostics all day long but do not imagine that this sin is very far from our own doorstep as well. Think of things that you know full well that God says in the Scriptures but you have at one time either ignored them or twisted them so that you could justify the choices you wanted to make. You proclaimed "fake news" to yourself and you said it long enough and loud enough until you began to believe it. For instance,

You know that he demands a faithful gift in the offering. Is your gift truly faithful in comparison to what he has given you? Only you can answer that but don't justify it with fake news. The answer is either yes or no.

You know that he clearly defines the parameters of sexuality and marriage. Do you bend those parameters to accommodate the

fake news you want to believe or what you want to do? Do you ignore false statements to make yourself or others more comfortable? Isn't more comfortable for us to just keep our mouths shut and allow people to believe whatever they want to believe?

You know what he says about murder. If you have even said "you fool" to your brother you have broken this commandment. Are you tempted to justify the way you have treated others as though you have not violated this commandment? Are you tempted to think up reasons why they deserved it? Or justification for why you couldn't have handled it in a better way?

We all struggle with this sin of bending and twisting God's testimony to make our lives more comfortable. You can go down the list of the 10 Commandments and find time after time when, you pretended you didn't hear that one. Everyone likes fake news when it benefits us, or makes us feel justified or superior, or makes life easier for us somehow.

If we had been left on our own, we would be lost. We would have destroyed every shred of faith we ever had with all of our self-righteous platitudes and holier-than-thou positions. But Jesus knew that we couldn't do it on our own. He knew that there was no way we would be able to ignore the testimony of man and

believe only the testimony of God. We are too weak, and sooner or later, we will latch on to some fake news that makes us feel better. So, in his prayer, from the Gospel today we hear him say to our Father in heaven,

“And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” He goes on to ask our Father to guard us from the evil one just as *he* did while he was on earth with us, and finally, that God would sanctify us, that is, that he would make us holy which he does through his Word, the waters of our baptism and the very body and blood of Jesus Christ himself. That’s how we continue to cling to the testimony of our God. Our God himself empowers us to do so, and without that power, we will wander off time and time again. We will begin to chase after Satan’s “fake news,” his evil, hellish gossip.

And we do wander off after Satan from time to time. All of us have, and all of us will again. What of our wanderings? God has given us repentance, that is, the power to stop going down the selfish, sinful paths that so attract us, turn around and come back to him, time after time. The most important thing that John

wanted his people and us to know was that God will continue drawing us back to him through his Word. He says in our Epistle,

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him." Jesus said it in Matthew 7. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." Now that is good news. Jesus promised up front to give us everything that is good for us. He promised to lead us to wherever blesses us. He promised to listen no matter what our trouble and empower us to endure and overcome.

This is the Good News we know is true and anything that conflicts with that is fake and to be avoided. The Good News gives us the strength to stand up to societal pressures that try to justify their own agendas at the expense of God's Word. The Good News empowers us to put the best construction on everyone and everything and quit trying to tear down people who disagree with

us. God gives us the power to say no to all the fake news and cling to the cross, which is the Good News.

In just a moment, I am going to invite forward the Rev. Dr. Dean Pittelko to receive an award on behalf of his father who, as you know, was received into paradise last November. I have the privilege, as the Midwestern Vice-President of the English District, to award the "Ille Dilexit Ecclesiam" Award to The Rev. Dr. Bishop Roger D. Pittelko. "Ille Dilexit Ecclesiam" means "He loved the Church" and we all know that no one loved the Church more than Bishop. One of the ways he demonstrated his love was his way of speaking the truth no matter who it offended. We always knew that, like it or not, when Bishop spoke, he was speaking the Word of God and if you didn't like it, argue with God, not Bishop. The trust we had in him came from long years of his speaking truth no matter what. He would speak it lovingly, but he would speak it pointedly, and he rarely spoke unless he needed to. He spoke because he loved the Church and was resolved to proclaim God's Good News as loudly and as often as he could, and in doing so, he helped drown out any fake news around him.