

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
June 26, 2011**

Matthew 7:15-20

There's a Time to Be Picky

- 1. A lesson on choice***
- 2. Factors in choice***
- 3. Jesus' shopping advice***
- 4. The results will be clear***

Hymns: 765 – 293

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

It's a dilemma that you've all probably faced. Dilemma might be a strong word, but it has been for me, so I'm going to use it. You are in the local grocery store, picking up all your supplies, crossing off your list and now you've made your way to the produce section. The produce section is a little different than the rest of the store. Away from the processed, canned and prepackaged products, the produce section forces you to be responsible for the quality of what you choose. And the produce section hits us with the question, "How do I pick the right fruit?" As you look around, sometimes the "no's" are quite obvious: You aren't going to grab the quickly browning banana, you aren't going to pick the alarmingly slimy lettuce; those picks are relatively easy. However, some of the decisions are more difficult. What are the colors to look for in a mango that signal that it is "good"? How do you tell if this avocado is going to be ready in two days when you want to make some fresh guacamole? And don't get me started on tomatoes; I have no clue how to pick one of those... it can be a struggle, how to pick? "What makes something good and what marks something as bad?"

On a more serious note, the dilemma of choice goes far beyond the local produce section. For most people, there comes a time in life when the search is on; the search for meaning; the search for relief; the search for solutions to the problems and resolutions for the guilt. Ultimately, it is a search that is all about what is going to happen after this life is over. And as people look for those answers, the choices are numerous, aren't they? The world is full of produce, solutions that people have come up with as hopeful answers to their problems. How could someone ever tell what was right? How can they tell what is going to give them all that they need?

As people go on that search they might come across some obvious "no's", man-made religions that seem to offer help but which eventually all show themselves to be filled with false solutions and more burdens. I'd throw religions like Buddhism and Islam into this category: Religions where you yourself have to do with the solution; religions where a provided answer is notably absent. I'd compare those to the overly brown banana. Yes, there are some people who like it, but ultimately it isn't too appealing and is easy to see the flaws. But put those to the side and focus on the many, many groups that claim to be Christian and the many denominations in Christianity and it becomes much more difficult for people. What makes them different? How do I pick the right one? What do I look for?

That proper identification is what Jesus had in mind when he spoke to his disciples in this section of Matthew. These were the concluding words of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. As he spoke about false teachers, he wasn't concerned with the blatant false teachers, they are easily identified. Instead, he was warning about the false teachers who are more difficult to spot, the ones in sheep's clothing, the ones who place unnecessary obstacles in the paths of

believers. In order to set his disciples straight and inform them about what to look for, he talked about fruit and we'll use Jesus' illustration throughout this morning, moving back and forth from the produce section to the church. I think it really helps to identify something that many of us, or many that we know, might struggle with as churches are compared.

As you stand before a mass selection of fruits and veggies, if you don't know what you are looking for you are probably going to go one of two ways. The first option is to stay with what you know. "I know a good apple when I see one and it's pretty difficult to mess up carrots, so I'll stick with those." But do that, and what are you missing out on? A vast array of different tastes and, more importantly, a needed assortment of vitamins and nutrients. You might not notice it, but that will have a long term effect on your overall health.

And it is the same way with picking a church. A while back, I saw a church with the slogan, "We focus on Jesus." Sounds pretty good, right? But that slogan is a back-handed slap at churches which teach all of the doctrines of the Bible, even the doctrines that might go against human reason or cause offense or lead to disagreements. What that church was saying is that all you need is apples and carrots, all you need is Jesus, don't sweat the other stuff. The Lord's Supper, Baptism, the inerrancy of God's Word; that stuff doesn't matter. And of course, all you need to get to heaven is Jesus, but baptism and the Lord's Supper give strength to our faith. The truthfulness of God's Word is the sure confidence behind our faith in Jesus. A church which brushes aside any of the teachings of God's Word is not helping its members grow, it's taking away things that God has given to provide spiritual strength and nourishment.

That is the first option as you face choice, stick with what you know. The second

option is to say it doesn't matter all that much. As I stand before a mountain of peppers, I eliminate some of the stress by saying, "I'll grab this one out of the many and it will do." "I'll bet they are all the same. I'm sure it will give me what I need." But do that, and you are sacrificing quality and taste, settling for something subpar when there is no need to do that. The long term result of settling is that your standards for taste are bound to go down.

Once again, it is the same way when it comes to churches. "It's all the same," or "We're all praising the same God," are some of the most common phrases you'll hear when a discussion of religion comes up. "I know that what they teach generally agrees with the Bible, so it will do." If that attitude is unhealthy when it comes to picking produce, imagine what it does to faith? A carefree pick of this church over here or that one there leads to standards that are lowered way down. It leads to lack of conviction for what is good and truthful. It leads to lack of instruction and guidance for our children. This attitude is what has allowed Mormonism to be classified as a Christian religion, though they don't believe that Jesus is the Savior of anything. If I grow up hearing from the world that "it's all the same," it's much easier for me to stray to other ideas. It is the devil's great new deception. He doesn't have to create animosity; he just waters everything down so that no one sees any differences. The danger is real; the prospect is faith that is founded in shallow teachings and Biblical knowledge that is faded away.

But the reality is that it doesn't have to be that way. People just need some guidance.

If Jesus were to go shopping with us, his advice would be simple, "Be more picky!" Don't be willing to ignore teachings because they don't seem as important as others. Don't be willing to settle. Search. Inspect. Maintain high standards. And if you are

wondering what to look for, Jesus has given us the measuring tool for inspection. It is the truth of his Word. It is no wonder that as Biblical literacy has decreased across the board, the ability of people to recognize good and bad teaching has also faded.

So, if we want to better understand all the different paths that are out there, if we want to be able to guide our children and friends and all those who search in the right direction, we need to study the Word. We need to examine all the teachings of Scripture so that we can explain them to others and defend God's teachings as many try to cast them aside as unimportant.

As we do that, a very simple truth will show itself. "Bad fruit is bad fruit" and "good fruit is good fruit." There is no in between. There is nothing up for debate. It most definitely is not "all the same." Jesus made that abundantly clear when he said, **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples."**

Bad teaching is any teaching that goes away from the Word of God. Some of this bad fruit is characterized by errors in teaching. Teachers that knowingly or unknowingly miss the mark when it comes to teaching the truth. An example would be churches that teach and believe that a person has the ability to choose Christ, to take part in their own conversion when the Bible clearly says that we are dead in our sins. Other bad fruit shows itself through their decision to diminish teachings of the Bible. Churches that downplay the importance of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as powerful tools of the Holy Spirit would be an example of this. And finally there are churches that show their bad fruit through ignored teachings. Churches which dismiss the idea that God's Word is 100% truth - even though Jesus says, "The Word is Truth."

The temptation is to defend those churches. We might try to find the good. We might say, "At least they believe in Jesus. But that

isn't what Jesus would say. You don't pick an apple that looks good on one side but is rotten on the other. And Jesus says that this bad fruit characterizes the whole tree from which it comes. **"A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit."** To borrow a popular phrase, "It is what it is." And when a tree is identified by its fruit to be bad, there is only one place for it to go. It is not going to give us the proper spiritual nourishment and growth, so it doesn't belong in our stomachs. Jesus says clearly that these trees which produce bad fruit are to be cut down and thrown in the fire. Or as the Apostle Paul told the early Christians when it came to those who taught contrary to any teaching of the Bible, **"Keep away from them."** Armed with the Word, the line is clear and the choices are easy. The bad fruit shows itself.

Thankfully, the good fruit will also show itself. Though sometimes it might be difficult to find, we have God's assurance that it will never go away. It is found where the Word of God in all its truth and purity remains as the sole focus and standard. And the encouragement from God's Word for those who have it is to never take it for granted. If I got a good piece of fruit from Safeway, I wouldn't go in there every time and assume that what I was getting was good. When it comes to God's Word, be diligent in testing. Use the Word to examine what you hear. Take time to ensure that you receive the good fruit that you need, the truth which strengthens your faith and allows you to grow.

I can't help but think that it would've been good to go shopping for produce with Jesus. There wouldn't be any time spent debating on whether a piece of fruit was good or bad. It would be clear because he knows exactly what he is looking for. Use his standard as you feed your faith. Share the good tree that you have found with the many that search. Amen.