

False Spiritual Leaders

Isaiah 57:2-21; Jude 1:12-15

Sunday, August 28, 2022 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction:

One of the classics we read in high school was Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, a series of medieval character studies involving a group of people on a pilgrimage. Several characters are people of authority in the church who are depicted as selfish and corrupt. God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the souls of women and men; those are matters of little importance. They are good examples of false spiritual leaders, in contrast to the poor rural priest who was the opposite of the others; not that interested in money, concerned about people, humble and reverent before God. The contrast shows some of the differences between true and false spiritual leaders. There were false leaders in the Middle Ages, there were false spiritual leaders in the early days of the church, according to Jude, and there are false spiritual leaders now.

- Set the stage:

Jude is a strange book. Just one chapter long, Jude is nestled between 3 John and Revelation. It is notable for quoting the Book of Enoch, widely in use in the days of the New Testament, but not part of the Canon, and for the author being a brother of Jesus Himself. Scholars believe that both Jude and James were written by men who literally grew up with Jesus and counted Him as their brother, but they say little or nothing about it in their writings. Jude wrote specifically to warn the church about false spiritual leaders

- Main Point:

They are spots in your love feasts and raging waves of the sea.

Jude, though very short, has much to say about leadership and who shouldn't be in it. A couple of phrases in his critique are that false spiritual leaders are "spots in your love feasts" and "raging waves of the sea." In the early days of the church they would have "love feasts", a gathering that would be a combination of the Sacrament of Holy Communion as well as a potluck all rolled into one. False spiritual leaders would be completely at home in such gatherings perpetually trying to bolster themselves at the expense of others. They would be like "spots" in that their behavior would not be fitting for a Christian gathering. They will always prefer to make excuses for themselves rather than apologize or accept responsibility or accountability. Such people crave authority but will never submit to authority. In fact, a sure giveaway about a false spiritual leader is that they do not ever try to make their behavior in casual settings match the standards they present in their sermons. They are like spots on an otherwise pristine garment. By the way, some scholars believe that "spots" could also mean rocks submerged just under the waterline that can rip a hole in a boat. The social application is pretty clear.

The description of "raging waves of the sea" is also in our passage from Isaiah and waves and rough sea were ancient symbols of humanity at its worst. It's more than someone who has a short temper, although that is bad in itself. Someone like a "raging wave of the sea" is someone who is constantly surrounded by drama and trouble and seems to thrive in it. They like being the center of attention and they like being controversial. The Apostle Paul mentioned such people in Romans (16:17) when he wrote: "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them." I remember a man, a relative of a respected elder in the church, came to the pastor's study about ten minutes before worship was to begin (they seem to always pick that time) with a request that he be allowed to address the congregation during worship. I had never met this man before. I felt that if he attended church for a year and we all got to know him we could consider what he had to say at that time. He didn't like the idea and shared his thoughts with people at random during fellowship time for the next several Sundays. I was so glad I did not let him speak to the congregation and was glad when he finally left. The last thing he said to me was telling, "I like to go around and stir things up." I have no doubt that he is in some church causing trouble and irritation to this day.

- Application

One application is not to place people in any position of authority unless you know them fairly well. Beware of anyone who does not submit to authority, as such people should never be in a position of leadership regardless of any skill or talent they have. Know that we are all accountable to one another. Within reason, everyone in a church is accountable to each other and to their pastor, and the pastor is accountable to everyone in the church. Anyone can find themselves in a controversy but watch out for people who seem to need to be in the middle of trouble. If someone causes drama simply because they like drama, do not make that person a leader.

- Conclusion

Jude, so many centuries ago, wrote his only epistle for the New Testament. He was, along with James, a brother of Jesus who grew up with Him and probably knew Him better than almost anyone, yet he chose to write about false spiritual leaders, see them as a pressing problem in those days. They were still there when Chaucer wrote his great poems and they are still around today. Anyone wanting to be in leadership should welcome accountability and submit to authority themselves, or they should not lead.