

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the source of our living water, Jesus Christ who is Savior and Lord of all, amen.

Unless you're living under a rock, you know what I mean when I use the term "Fake News." It's gotten so bad I can't tell what to believe when it comes to news anymore. For over a year we saw video of buildings and police cars being burned while the talking heads told us these were peaceful protests. Now we see truck drivers who merely parked their semis on the streets of Ottawa Canada and played hockey in the streets and those same talking heads repeat the words of Canadian political officials who claim the protestors were violently trying to overthrow the legitimate government of Canada. I'm not even going to get into what happened on the grounds of our own Capital a little over a year ago... The thing is, humans have been trying to deal with "Fake News" almost from the beginning of time. Remember the story from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Genesis where a serpent intentionally misinterpreted God's words and misled Adam and Eve? The purpose of the serpent was to sew the seeds of discord between the humans and God on the one hand and between the humans themselves on the other. The manipulation of information has always been a part of the struggle for power and wealth. In warfare, it was called propaganda. In trade, it is called advertising. There were times when the information at our disposal was quite limited and manageable. In recent years, particularly with the rapid spread of internet, social

media, and the 24 hour news cycle we need to deal with virtually unlimited flows of information that come to us in ever more dazzling speed. It's especially frightening now because we don't necessarily know any more, where the information is coming from or what it's intended to achieve.

It may surprise you to know that the situation was no different in the time of Jesus. The Gospel text puts us in the middle of a huge dispute over who Jesus really is and what should be done with him. Jesus made his own claims concerning his identity and his mission. He called upon the people to recognize him for who he claimed to be, and to follow in his footsteps. Not everybody was convinced. His way of life and his teaching—however impressive and extraordinary—also raised a lot of eyebrows. There were two sides to the debate. Many people saw in Jesus a man of God. He exercised unusual and unnatural healing powers. They liked him. Some of them said he could be the Prophet that God had promised all the way back to the time of Moses. Others thought he was the Messiah, the descendant of king David, who would establish a kingdom that would last forever.

The leaders of the Jewish people were sure Jesus was a con. They had two substantial arguments against Jesus. The first was that he was from Galilee. Galilee was not where men of God would come from—no prophets, and certainly not “the Prophet.” They also knew for sure, the Messiah, the Son of David, would

come from Bethlehem, not from Nazareth. There was even more crucial evidence against Jesus. Certainly, He did some very good things, like healing people and driving out demons, but He did them on a Sabbath, when God's Law forbade the Jewish people to work. So, they concluded, a man from Galilee who constantly breaks the Sabbath Command cannot be a man of God. They couldn't see beyond what they thought they knew about God and God's Law...

So, to bring back law and order, the Jewish leaders sent armed temple guards to arrest Jesus and bring him in for cross-examination and a quick trial. They wanted to prevent the Romans, who occupied the land, from becoming alarmed and intervening in the internal affairs of their Jewish nation. After all, Jesus was teaching in the Temple, where they called the shots. Can you imagine the surprise and indignation of the leaders when the temple guards returned empty-handed!? When the leaders demanded an explanation, they simply said, "No one ever spoke the way this man does."

What Jesus said, and the way he said it, were so unique and overwhelming, the temple guards simply could not bring themselves to arrest Him. Jesus didn't resort to clever rhetorical devices to capture his audience. He wasn't being overly theatrical. He didn't capitalize on the latest findings in media and advertising. He simply was being himself, genuinely himself. He connected to his audience in a way that nobody really understood. He spoke from His heart directly to their heart.

Jesus disarmed the temple guards not by violence or force, but by his words. The question forces itself upon us, how, exactly, did his words change their hearts—and, no doubt, so many others who heard Jesus speak.

First, Jesus' teaching was full of authority and truth. The evangelist Matthew writes, after Jesus finished his famous Sermon on the Mount, "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." I always smile when I read that about Jesus. He is the very Word of God incarnate, after all... He wasn't a philosopher, who contemplated questions of life on a deep and profound level and left his thoughts for others to meditate upon. He wasn't a teacher, who developed new models, new curricula, or new theories about life, religion, and God. Jesus himself was God—and Jesus still is God. His words were indeed God's own words, and they never fail to touch each person who comes to Jesus with an open mind and an open heart.

Still today, when we read or hear the teaching of Jesus from the Gospels, we immediately sense how true his words are on a very deep and existential level. You simply can't escape its message. Even after 2,000 years, it never ceases to address us and our lives, here and now. It hits the target every time again—exactly when and where we need it the most. The Jewish leader Nicodemus noticed it when he came in the middle of the night to Jesus to discuss with him—and he was overwhelmed. The Samaritan woman at the well noticed it when Jesus asked her

for a drink and then offered her the water of life. She, too, was overwhelmed. No doubt, the temple guards noticed it and they were overwhelmed too.

A second way Jesus overwhelmed the crowds and even the temple guards who were sent to arrest Him, was through His divine love and compassion. Some people may disagree with that. It is true, his teachings can feel at times to be extremely tough, demanding, and uncompromising. I mean it's hard enough to love your friends and family sometimes, but come on Jesus, love even our enemies. How are we supposed to do that in a world that describes those who disagree with us as terrorists and Nazis on one side, and communists and dictators on the other? There is something gentle and compassionate about even the toughest challenges that Jesus sets before us. Jesus was so different from the teachers of the law in his time, who set the demands of the law of Moses before the people as huge obstacles on the way to salvation. Following Jesus does come with a price tag—a huge price tag. Jesus asks us to give Him our lives just as he gave his life for us. Jesus spoke to women and men whom society had rejected, with words that communicated acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. He healed those whose sickness no one else bothered to treat. He helped those who were too weak to help themselves. In his compassion, he gave new value and meaning to those whose lives were empty and meaningless. That message of love and mercy still resounds because it fills the void in our hearts meant to be filled by

God and then offers us a purpose for living. We take the message of Jesus to our own heart when we raise funds for a sister in Christ to receive the dental care she needs to live a healthy life. Or when we come together to serve grieving families after they release their loved one to eternity. Those are just two ways we're overwhelmed by the words of Jesus in our lives. There are so many more...

When Jesus speaks, he creates a direct hotline between the loving heart of God and our hearts. We get to experience that connection on a very deep and existential level, even though we can't explain it. When Jesus speaks, you can sense God's loving presence—you can almost touch him with your hands. He wants to strengthen you and build you up in your faith. He wants you to recognize Jesus as your God, and Lord, and Savior—not just on an intellectual and theological level, but also on an existential, a deep spiritual soul level. Today I want to encourage you and challenge you to continue to let God speak to you through the words of Jesus in the Gospels—or in any other way that he chooses to speak to you right now. Allow him to reveal his truth, his love and his heart to you so that still small voice of God can come through all the Fake News that permeates our lives. As the Gospel fills you up, feel it fill the well of your soul with God's love. When your soul is overwhelmed, you too will have an unending supply of God's grace to bring to our neighbors who are still in need of that life-giving water. Trinity Lutheran Church, drink up! Amen.