

Third Sunday after the Epiphany; St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor; January 26, 2025

Titus 1:1-9

“Faithful and True”

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God’s elect people and knowledge of the truth that conforms to godliness, based on the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began. At the proper time he revealed this in the world, in the preaching that was entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior,

To Titus, my true child in our common faith:

Grace and peace from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

The reason I left you in Crete was so that you would set in order the things that were left unfinished and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you. Such a man is to be blameless, the husband of only one wife, and to have believing children who are not open to charge of wild living or disobedience. Indeed an overseer, since he is God’s steward, must be blameless, not arrogant, not quick-tempered, not a drunkard, not violent, not eager for dishonest gain. Instead, he must be hospitable, loving what is good, self-controlled, upright, devout, and disciplined. He must cling to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he will be able both to encourage people by the sound teaching and also to correct those who oppose him.

He didn’t write a book in the Bible. Not a single word he spoke is recorded, either. The only thing we know physically about him is that he wasn’t circumcised. And of all things to know about a man, why this one thing? Because to do it would have been to surrender to false teachers who were insisting that New Testament Christians must keep Old Testament laws. But, still, that’s all we know about his physical being. His name is mentioned just thirteen times in the Scriptures.

We’re told little of his background, his qualifications, his attributes, or his accomplishments, and yet a feast day—this day—is set aside in the church year to honor him: St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor. Why him? Why now? Why still?

Did you know that Adam, and Noah, and Abraham have days in the church year named in their honor, too? They have days, too...but not feast days. Same with Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Elijah and many other heroes of the faith. They all have days of commemoration, but not special feast days where we go so far as to change the paraments and have special readings and prayers. What gives, anyway? Why Titus—who is only briefly discussed in Scripture—and not, for example Moses—who not only wrote five books of the Bible, but whose life and work is detailed in four lengthy ones?

Here is an explanation from the website of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod:

In every case, it is important to remember that when we honor the memory of the saints we are thereby honoring the Lord and God and Savior of us all, who called these men and women to be his own. He redeemed them and sanctified them, and he blessed them to serve to the glory of his name for the benefit of others.

There are some saints in particular whose lives on earth are so closely connected with the earthly life and ministry of Jesus that their stories are literally part of the Gospel itself. Along with Mary and John the Bapt[ist]...perhaps the most obvious examples would be the apostles and evangelists.

In the history of the church, including the history of our Lutheran Church, the commemorations of these saints have been observed with special distinction—always to the praise and glory of Christ Jesus and His Gospel.

These days are really treated as “Feasts of Christ,” that is to say, as days when we remember, celebrate, and give thanks for the life that our Lord Jesus Christ lived for us in the flesh. For these reasons, it is appropriate to observe these “Feasts” with the Sacrament of the Altar, in which the Word-made-flesh draws close to us and gives himself to us in much the same way that he came and lived among the apostles and other disciples in the New Testament.

By contrast, the commemorations of other saints from the Old Testament and throughout the history of the church on earth are normally observed in daily prayer within the family, in the Christian day school, in the chapels of our colleges and seminaries, and in parishes where it is possible to gather for Matins or Vespers during the week.

So, there you have it! Titus fits the bill. Although we have no evidence or reason to believe that he ever personally interacted with Jesus during our Savior’s earthly ministry, his lifespan likely overlapped that of Jesus’ time, and his service took place in the apostolic ministry under Paul’s guidance.

Through Titus, not only was the gospel to be proclaimed on the island of Crete as we heard in today’s Second Lesson, but he also was pivotal in several other important New Testament events. He participated in the preaching of the gospel at Troas, at Corinth, in Macedonia, and in Dalmatia, as well as in the collection of money in Greece for the relief of the suffering Christians in Jerusalem.

Titus was also Paul’s living example of how an uncircumcised Gentile could be a faithful believer in Jesus—standing with Paul in front of the other apostles against the accusations of the false teachers that he wasn’t a real believer because he didn’t follow the Law of Moses. At a critical juncture in the history of the Church, Paul argued that it was not necessary that someone become a Jew in the flesh in order to become a Christian in the heart. James, the brother of Jesus and bishop of Jerusalem, agreed—as did St. Peter and St. John. From then on, God blessed the rapid spread of the gospel among Jew and Gentile alike.

So, then, what does this mean for you—American Christians living 19 and a half centuries and more than 6,000 miles from Crete, where Paul sends his letter to Titus? For that matter, what do any of today’s Scripture readings have to do with you, sitting there in the pews?

After all, in the First Lesson, from Acts, Paul is talking to the pastors in Ephesus. He is bidding them to be vigilant in attending to the congregation, and warning them of dangerous teachers and teachings that would threaten their faith and salvation. In the Second Lesson, we hear Paul’s guidance to Titus, telling him to seek and appoint men of certain qualifications to be pastors in all the towns on Crete. And finally, in the Gospel, Jesus, too, is appointing missionaries to journey throughout the land, proclaiming God’s peace and the coming of the kingdom.

Isn't this stuff all about pastors, apostles, missionaries—that is, professional church workers? *“Leave us out of it, Pastor!”* you might be thinking. *“Let’s just get through this sermon, and through the Creed, and zip zip so we can get to our coffee and then get home and get on with the thousand-and-one things we’ve got to do this week!”*

Well, it’s exactly that kind of thinking which means you really need to hear what Paul and Jesus are saying today. The things about which Paul and Jesus admonish, warn, and instruct these pastors are things that you’d better pay attention to, also. If you don’t, there’s a risk that you won’t get the gospel. And if you don’t get the gospel, you will soon lose Jesus. And if you lose Jesus, you will also be drawn away from his cross and empty tomb, setting aside forgiveness of your sins and God’s gifts of salvation and eternal life for worldly thing or for false spirituality.

It is ever so important that all of God’s Church—pastors and lay people alike—keep careful watch on the flock. For it is the history of the Church at large; of our Synod; even of congregations I have served, that what is warned about and forbidden in these verses happens. It has happened before, and it will happen again.

Just as Paul guided Titus in choosing overseers for the congregations, you also must be vigilant—helping and uplifting the pastors who serve you when they stumble. For there may be times when they will not be hospitable, upright, holy, self-controlled and disciplined lovers of good. They very well might become arrogant, quick-tempered, drunk, violent, or greedy.

At such times, they will need your Christian love and admonishment, leading to repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. And you must keep these things in mind for the future—you, and your children, and all those who will come into this fellowship must—for there will come a day when all pastors go the way of the highway or the way all flesh, and God will raise up new servants, stewards, and overseers for you.

More than any other earthly behavior or attribute or action, though, the most important thing you can do for your pastors is to learn and know what St. Paul termed **the trustworthy message**. This means reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the Scriptures through your own Bible reading, of course. But also in studying it with your brothers and sisters of this flock. In immersing yourself in the scripture-laden liturgy of worship, week in and week out, letting no worldly thing get in your way. In deeply delving into the Bible-rich words of our hymns. In absorbing the good doctrine spoken in the creeds and the catechism. And in hearing the salvation offered to you in the bloody crucifixion and glorious resurrection of Jesus, as it is proclaimed to you in the preaching and the teaching.

All these are means by which you, too, can **cling to the trustworthy message as it has been taught**. Christians who do will not only help pastors build up your brothers and sisters, but will hold them accountable to God and his Church, too. This is not a threat to your pastors, only to their sinful nature and their limitations. It is actually a great blessing for them to know that they, too, will be led back to the foot of the cross, should they ever stray.

Paul was telling Titus how important it is that those who teach and preach in Christ’s Church do so in accordance with the revelation we have received in the Holy Scriptures. Note how Paul closes the final verse of our Second Lesson: **so that he will be able both to encourage people by the sound teaching and also to correct those who oppose him.**

To encourage people by the sound teaching is to proclaim the fullness of God's counsel—the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. All Scripture is God-breathed, we are told. It is both Spirit-given and perfect, and it all points to Christ, who was led and uplifted by that same Spirit to live a perfect life so that he might atone for your sins in his suffering and death. And he sends that same Spirit to us today, giving us the fullness of who he is in Word and Sacrament.

To correct those who oppose him is the ability and strength not just to combat false teachings which go against the Word of God, but also to admonish and condemn the words and actions of those who contradict God's word with their persistent sins. Living a false life as a Christian in full view of our believing brothers and sisters, and as poor witnesses of the faith to the world around us, can be every bit as dangerous to the salvation of others as false teaching.

They will know you as Jesus' disciples by your love, certainly, and that is how we always hope to be seen. But they will also know us by our sins, and they will make judgments about Christ and his Church from every bit of hypocrisy and evil that we show them. It's why the Christian life must be one of continual repentance, never thinking that we are so good that we don't need his grace and mercy every moment. Comfort and confident in our salvation by the merits of Christ, yes; cockiness and self-assurance, no.

And so Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, sent Titus to Crete. Titus was to spread that truth and the godliness—the righteousness—which it provides, to all those he encountered, and he was to multiply the church in Crete through the appointing of new pastors throughout the island.

This process continues today for the sake of God's elect—many not yet identified, many not yet even born. New Pauls and new Tituses repeat the cycle of training, equipping, sending, encouraging, and guiding, so that Jesus is rightly brought in Word and Sacrament to the Cretes and the Woodbridgers and everyone in between. So rejoice in Titus; rejoice in Paul—but most importantly, rejoice that you have heard and believed the message they once proclaimed, for it brings you forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Amen.