

“Test the Spirits”

Liturgical Date: Easter 5 (B)

Primary Text: 1 John 4:1-11

Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Fifth Sunday of Easter, is the Epistle Lesson from 1 John Chapter 4. The title of the sermon is, “Test the Spirits”.

That is an interesting phrase in Scripture that we heard today, to “*test the spirits*”. It may not be understood by everyone as to what exactly St. John means by this. When we hear the word “test” it can bring to mind several things. Maybe a written test in school that you needed to pass. Perhaps something that someone puts before you to test you, to see if you have the potential to do what they want you to do. Or maybe even testing something to see if it works. Which is not a bad idea before going live with something to first test it! But testing spirits? It sounds a little strange, a little mystical perhaps. What spirits are we talking about? We know the Holy Spirit as Christians, but other spirits? Well, it is clear from the passage that testing the spirits is something that we are supposed to do. So, what is it? Why would we want to “test spirits”? How would do that? These are questions that the sermon today will answer.

There is so much spiritual confusion in our world today. There always has been, do doubt, but in the United States we did have a fairly common Judeo-Christian idea of God for much of our history. This is no longer so today. The American religious landscape is a virtual buffet of spiritual ideas and practices,

with many people mixing elements of different religious practices and beliefs to form their own spiritual outlook on the world. It is common today for people to tell you, *“I am not really religious, but I am spiritual person.”* Essentially by saying this they often mean, “I don’t ascribe to a particular denomination or even religion or attend a particular house of worship, but I do think there is a spiritual world out there that is important.” Being spiritual can be seen as a good thing by many people, somewhat of a middle ground between being “religious” or “secular”. But is there a danger in this? Of course there is. Opening oneself up to all types of teaching will inevitably open them up to false ideas. And it is a pretty self-centered idea: I look at everything out there and then I decide what I want to believe and practice. But our modern Western society likes that, “it’s all about me.”

Being “spiritual” isn’t superior to being “religious”. In fact, one could be either “spiritual” or “religious” and be very wrong either way. This is because we want to know the truth, believe what God says is right, and practice our faith in accordance with God’s expectations and commands. Rather than centering our beliefs and lifestyle on what we like or are comfortable with, we need to discern what God has told us and obey and follow that.

This relates to the first portion of our Epistle text from 1 John 4. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the by this time aged and experienced Apostle John writes, *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”* St. John is very blunt and uncompromising in this Epistle, much of it is very “black and white” as he contrasts “light and darkness”, “Christ and Anti-Christ”, and “love and hate.” In that first verse we see this clearly as St. John does not say to

just believe any spirit that you want, and that any spiritual teacher is as good as another. Rather, he says, *“do not believe every spirit”* and that we should *“test...to see whether they are from God”* and that there are *“many false prophets.”* There is truly a spirit that is correct and good and other spirits that are wrong and harmful. In verse 4, we are told that there is a “spirit of the antichrist”, and this is obviously a dark and evil force to be avoided.

Thus, as opposed to choosing from a smorgasbord of spiritualism and taking in what we like, we are to seek the truth that comes only from the spirit of God. And to determine what is from God and what is from the antichrist we must “test the spirits”. We have to see if a particular spiritual teaching passes the test. And how exactly do we do that?

Well, the short answer is we test any spiritual teaching against the only 100% true authority that we have. Just like a teacher grades a test based on an answer key of correct answers, the Christian has an answer key to gauge spiritual teachings. God has given us the truth, the answers that can always be trusted: in His Holy Word, the Bible. As our Lutheran forefathers penned in the introduction to the Formula of Concord, *“We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone.”* When you study and know your Bible you will be able to see which spiritual teachings “pass the test.” You will hear a teaching, perhaps even from a group that professes to be Christian, and your little Christian “discernment antennas” will go up. You will know that something is off about what they are teaching. When a religious teacher says there are many gods, you know that can’t be right because the Bible clearly says there is one God. When a

religious teacher says there are many ways to God, you will know this is an error because the Bible teaches us the only way to heaven is through Jesus. When a religious teacher says that you must do good things to earn God's favor, you know this is heresy because the Bible says that we are saved by grace through faith.

The Old Testament often speaks of false prophets. In Deuteronomy 18:20-22 we read that when a true prophet speaks, then what they say will come to pass. There have been so many false predictions by so-called prophets that have not come true, about the return of Christ and so many other things. But amazingly people still listen to them. But it stands to reason that if God tells someone something to share with others, then it should happen. God does not lie. Thus, if a prophet or religious teacher is saying something is going to happen at a specific time and it doesn't, then we should not trust them as a true teacher from God. But there can be times when a false prophet does predict something correctly, either by chance or because they were empowered by Satan. So, while that can be a helpful test, if what they say comes to pass, that can't be the only test. We know a true prophet of God would not speak anything that goes against the principles of Scripture, so if they do, they are of the spirit of Antichrist and not of Christ.

And more good news for us in trying to test the spirits is that John the Apostle gives us some specific things in the text in knowing how to test the spirits. And really to judge a prophet as being from God or not you often do not have to go further than one key issue. What is that, you ask? Verses 2-3, *"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming, and now is the*

world already.” You see, it all really comes down to Jesus. What are they teaching about Jesus? They may talk about Jesus, but the Jesus that they confess is not the Jesus as revealed to us in the Bible. John was dealing with this in his time with a group of people called the Gnostics. They talked about Jesus, but it was not the Jesus of the Bible. Their Jesus was not fully man. They did not confess that Jesus, the Son of God, had truly come in the flesh. As Christians we must agree with the Bible, that Jesus is 100% God and 100% man. To confess otherwise would be confessing a Jesus that cannot save us and I don’t have to tell that would be a big problem! Jesus must be true man to have flesh and blood, that He could actively keep the law, bleed, and die for the sins of the world. And Jesus must also be true God to be the perfect sacrifice for sin, as only God is perfect. So, when that person tries to talk to you about Jesus, even coming knocking at your door, but they are not telling you about the Jesus of the Bible, they are false prophets. They don’t have the true Jesus of the Scripture.

Unfortunately, many will listen to these false teachers, though. Verses 5-6 make that clear. They are of the world and the world listens to them, but those of us who know the truth cannot be fooled by such false teachers, they fail the basic test of not even knowing who God is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we should try to present the true God, the true Jesus of the Bible, to them. But they may not listen. If they will not listen to the true God, this is a serious problem and error. Verse 6, *“We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”* If someone will not listen to God’s Word, the Bible, they fail the test. They cannot be speaking for God if they won’t speak or listen to what He has revealed to us in His Word.

And finally, we see that love plays a big role in this testing of the spirits in the last few verses of the Epistle reading today. The second part of verse 8 is well-known and well-loved by many people, *“God is love.”* A Christian loves. Verses 7 and the first part of 8, *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God.”* Truth and love are not opposed to each other, in fact they go hand in hand. We know that the Bible has Law and Gospel. We need to understand, and Lutherans have always taught this, if you don’t read the Bible through the lens of it being a book about Jesus and you don’t understand the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, you will never understand the Bible correctly. A teacher that is only speaking Law, only accusing and condemning fails the test. They cannot be a true teacher of God’s Word, because a true teacher must also present the love of God that is found in the Gospel. God hates sin, but we are not to hate people—even those that are different in their moral code and beliefs. To be certain we are not supposed to agree with their false ideas and teachings, but we are to still love. Because they are people for whom Jesus also died. God’s desire is that the erring repent and turn to Him in faith.

Because it was out of love as to why God came in the flesh as Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. Verse 10, *“In this love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”* Wow! Good stuff. Our love is not good enough to save ourselves or anyone else. But God’s love is. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. This is how God shows His love, in Jesus Christ. The only perfect, the only truly innocent human being, dying for the sins of everyone else. Taking that sin upon Him and carrying it to the cross. And rising from the dead in victory over sin and every falsehood.

Life conquers death in Jesus. So, test the spirits. Test to see if what they are saying is true and comes to pass. Test to see if they line up to what the Holy Bible teaches us. Test to see if they confess Jesus correctly. Test to see if they know what true love is and that they are proclaiming that. In doing so, you will see and know the truth that sets you free. You will know what is of Christ and what is of the Antichrist. And this you will see victory over death and sin because Jesus has defeated death itself.

Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.