



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *“By Their Fruits You Will Know Them”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
September 28, 2025

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew 7:15-20 (*The Inclusive Bible*)  
(Jesus is teaching) *"Be on your guard against false prophets who come to you disguised as sheep, but underneath are ravenous wolves. You will be able to tell them by their fruit. Can people pick grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, a sound tree produces good fruit and a rotten tree produces bad fruit. A sound tree cannot produce rotten fruit, and a rotten tree cannot produce good fruit. Any tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire. I repeat, you'll be able to tell them by their fruit."*

## Sermon

Thank you for being here. Was anybody else a little disappointed in the rapture Tuesday? We're still here. Yeah. *[Laughter]* That's a good thing for a Presbyterian pastor—your congregation is still going to be there. You know your pastor will still be here after the rapture.

Not to rat anybody out, but someone from our staff—when I came into work that day—had set up in her chair, which is the administrator's chair. I'm not going to say who it was. But did anybody see the movie *Left Behind*? She had the shoes, the empty clothes...A+. A+. That was great. *[Laughter]*

I put that on my Facebook page, and someone—one of my MAGA friends—sent me their disappointment that I was making fun of other people's religion. God knows MAGA folks don't make fun of anybody, which is great. *[Laughter]*

What I said to them—and what I'd say to anybody—is this: tolerance isn't about putting up with bad ideas. Tolerance is about giving people their human rights. If you claim to support free speech while repressing people's freedoms, that's not tolerance. There is nothing tolerant about the MAGA movement.

That's nothing new, I'm sure, to anybody here. But our passage today helps us understand the importance of condemnation and tolerance. *Do not let yourself be led astray by false prophets.*

Now, if you're from a different tradition, that would be me, right? I'm often called a wolf in sheep's clothing. But let me ask this: Does a wolf believe in gun control? Does a wolf want health care for all people?

Think about what that image means. It's like Jesus is saying, *just look at the fruit*. Is it kind, or is it cruel? Is it wise, or is it deeply, deeply stupid? [Laughter] I'll let you judge. I'm just asking the questions...

This part of the Sermon on the Mount is interesting because Jesus has talked about not judging. He said all kinds of things that are nearly impossible to pull off, like loving your enemies. This part? This is like the warning label.

We only have a few more passages to look at, and he's letting people know it's not as simple as it might have sounded before. To be a loving person, you have to have very strong boundaries. And you have to care enough about your neighbor to protect them, even if that means protecting them from the Church...protecting them from your nation.

Christianity is countercultural by definition. The fact that it has morphed into Christian nationalism is a cancerous movement. Pretending Jesus loved America...I don't think he would have disliked us, but we weren't here. Guns weren't here. The American flag wasn't here. So when you try to make those things essential or take things Jesus didn't even talk about, like people's gender associations, abortion, and say those are the core of his teaching...if the word "heresy" means anything, that's it. If "heresy" makes any sense whatsoever, if it can be applied to anything, Christian nationalism is the best example, I think.

In ancient Judaism (and we sometimes forget Jesus was Jewish) we had space lasers. That's why people...[Laughter] Judaism had some sanity touchstones that Christianity could really use. One of them was called the Shema. The Shema says: *God is one. Love God with all your heart, mind, and strength*. It is said in different ways.

Many people believe the essential part is *God is one*, and who knows what the focus was. But to me, that call to love with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength—that's the key to religious sanity. If your love opens to truthfulness, compassion, courage, then you know you're on the right path.

A false prophet shuts you down—with fear, superstition, propaganda, and boundary ethics. It's us against the world. They said, "Put that in a little box, keep it on your forehead, put it in your..." Don't ever forget this. And guess what Christianity did. We jettisoned it. We forgot. Like the Sabbath, like the sacred name. All those things—most Christians have no idea what they mean, but those are the pillars of spiritual sanity. It has to be love. It has to be love that opens up to justice, but also to universality.

Now, this might seem like a leap, but I want to talk about *The Wizard of Oz*. [Laughter] Stay with me for a second. Because when you think about loving with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength, those are the themes of *The Wizard of Oz*. The Scarecrow doesn't think he has a brain. The Tin Man doesn't think he has a heart. The Lion doesn't think he has courage.

*The Wizard of Oz* is a great metaphor for the spiritual journey. A little girl is bored in her home in Kansas. The film starts off in black and white. Then she goes on this incredible journey that shifts to color, and then she realizes the treasure was always at home.

That's the life journey. That's the spoiler alert. If we're going to learn the lessons of life, that's it: the sacred is in the ordinary. We can't control much of life. And at a time when it just seems like everything has gone insane, it's very important to remember that what's most important is inside of us. What's most important, and what will keep us sane, is to continue to love with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength.

But to do that, we have to reject Christian nationalism. You can't love with all your mind if someone's telling you what to think. You can't love with all your heart if someone's telling you which relationships are proper and which ones aren't. You can't love with all your strength if you're so afraid of God that you don't stand up for anything or anybody.

The first person I want to pick out of *The Wizard of Oz*—and no, I'm not getting any money for this from Warner Brothers or whoever—is the Cowardly Lion. He's well-represented in the Trump White House with that false bravado. The warriors who never went to war. They are so willing to send other people's children to bleed and die, but they themselves were protected when their time came.

Not only is Donald Trump destroying democracy in the United States, he's destroying the Republican Party...gutting it. The party of small government is now sending federal troops into Democratic cities. Does that sound like small government? That's not conservative. It's not Republican. It's fascism.

Jesus is saying it's okay to renounce that. It's okay to resist it. That's a false teaching. And when they do it in the name of Jesus, we have a responsibility to protect the people they're coming after in Jesus' name and in our name.

Think of the cowardice that goes after transgender people...maybe the gentlest people on the face of the earth. Donald Trump has been able to frighten people. Big, tough men are *frightened* of transgender people and drag queens.

Undocumented immigrants have a much lower rate of crime than American citizens. But you'd never know it, listening to the lies of Donald Trump. I feel sorry for him. I feel sorry for someone who has no idea what truth is. You just see him making stuff up. Here's this poor, pitiful, wounded soul who would rather lie than be a normal person, an average person, which is what we all are.

Isn't it strange how much of Trump's policies lift up the Confederacy? Have you ever noticed that the Bible Belt, for the most part, borders the Confederacy? Why is Trump so concerned with naming bases after Confederate soldiers?

What a direct assault on people whose history is different from white people's. People who are just as American as anybody else, but who have to walk into the public square and see a Confederate soldier—a human trafficker—lifted up as a model. Would anybody name a ship the USS *Benedict Arnold*? He was a *traitor*. That's what the Confederacy was. These were people willing to kill their fellow citizens so they could continue human trafficking.

If that's your "Southern heritage" you need to get out more. Because you're like a potato. All your good stuff is underground. You need to blossom some. You need some branches and leaves, because you're a lot more important than that.

What a prophet today would say—if one were to come speak to us—is that what Trump is trying to hide, and not just Trump alone but recent presidents too, is that America is no longer the empire it was after World War II. We can act as tough as we want, but we lost in Vietnam. We lost to the Taliban. And essentially, we lost in Iraq. We're no longer the toughest person on the block. We're descending and China is rising.

What a prophet would say is: that's something you have to stop lying about. Donald Trump is destroying the American empire. He's forcing other nations to turn to China just to have dignity. Did you see the speech he gave this week? If you're from another country, would you cower? The MAGA movement is made up of people who cower, which is tragic for them.

The prophets came to persuade people that Israel was not going to be a world power again. But they came to give hope—that there was something better on the horizon. There's something better than the United States kicking everybody around. We could be true to our principles instead, and be a place where every human being finds life, liberty, and the right to pursue happiness.

But to do that, we have to give up false hopes. We have to stop lying about our history and pretending everything was good for everybody. MAGA people may not know it consciously, but in their hearts, they know that they're marginalizing much of America by telling a white Christian narrative.

If the Church doesn't stand up and shout from the rooftops, we miss our time in history—our time to be prophetic.

The Cowardly Lion was the first character I'm lifting up (and I've wandered off a little bit here). Next is the Tin Man. He's a robot designed to work so hard that he's lost his own heart. Now, forgive me, but I think that's a good metaphor for capitalism...where workers are driven to despair. The gig economy is a remnant of cannibalism, where people live with such worker insecurity that they're afraid to ask for their rights. That's not an accident. That's on purpose. That's what capitalism does.

People haven't liked to hear that for 30 years here, but it's hard to deny now, right? When you have a system based on property right and greed, it rewards greed. It punishes cooperation. The worst people in your culture rise to the top. You end up in a tragic situation where criminals are no longer robbing banks, but banks are robbing people.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy was unhappy with Kansas. Again, it was shown in black and white. When she arrives in this technicolor world, filled with the most fascinating people, whatever they were, she misses home. The America we've made up will never be home. It's not real. Home is the people. Home is the land.

When you love flags and hate people, you don't have a home. You don't have a home. So we're not fighting anybody. We're giving the ultimate gift of their own heart—by calling them to their home in nature, in humankind, in the web of life.

In the story, I love this line: *No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live here than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There's no place like home.* I don't think she means the United States there. Her life seems so boring that she gets caught up in this fantasy.

The Wizard of Oz was a huckster. The President of the United States is a huckster. I'm not talking about the person. I'm talking about the function. You don't have to let that lead you into despair. You don't have to cooperate with that. You can be the resistance. And there are times in history when resistance is the only prayer that matters. There's something sacred about refusing to be subhuman in this horrifying new day.

So remember: there's no place like home. And as scary as it may seem, this is where happiness lies. You can live a life of happiness, of dignity, of peace. Just remember your humanity and live in your heart.

Now, the last character we're going to look at is the Scarecrow, whose head was so stuffed with straw that he couldn't think. There are a lot of church people whose heads are so filled with stuffing that they can't think. They can't ask questions. They look at Tylenol [*laughter*] as a mortal threat to women. They care so much about women all of a sudden. They can't even say the name of the medicine.

Robert Kennedy Jr. does not have a medical degree, but he's interfering in the lives of people he's never met and *overriding people with expertise*. The MAGA movement hates expertise. Any expertise. They want to be able to sit at a computer, spend ten minutes, and decide where autism comes from. The world doesn't work like that.

The word *heresy* is very interesting. I'm going to do a sermon on that someday. But the original meaning of *heresy* wasn't that you were outside the norm. It meant *hair-splitter*—someone who rejected others for minor reasons.

Someone who gets tunnel vision for Jesus? That's a heretic. Somebody who thinks Christianity has copyrighted love, goodness, and mercy? That's a heretic. Because love blossoms into universality, or it's not really love.

So love with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength.

The Secretary of Education now comes from the world of professional wrestling. There have been many times in history when the Church took on education, not to brainwash, but to liberate. We're living in one of those times again.

Kahlil Gibran wrote a poem that is often heard at weddings. I think it's one the nation needs to hear. When people want to propagandize our children, Gibran says:

*Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.  
You may give them your love but never your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
Which you cannot visit, even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them,  
But seek not to make them like you,  
For life does not go backward nor tarries with yesterday.*

If you're feeling a little bummed out about the rapture...sorry you were left behind...?  
[Laughter] It happens to me about once a year.

However bad things seem, this is an opportunity. It makes every difference whether we love with all our mind—whether we fact-check our beliefs. And if we don't know, we say, "I don't know." Did Jesus rise from the dead? I don't know. I wasn't there.

We should love with all our heart—which means not giving up on anybody, including MAGA people. It means seeing the humanity in every person.

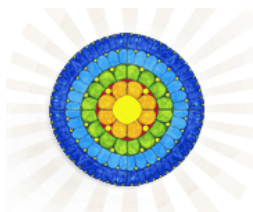
And finally, we love with all our courage. If we can find the courage to stop lying about America and start telling the truth of our history, then we can learn from our history. We can improve. We can do better.

That's true love of America. If you have to close your eyes to love America, it's not love. But if we come to love the people of this country and the land, and we honor the water, the air, the soil, we'll find ourselves realizing that we're already in the place we've been looking for. And that there's no place like home.

## Benediction

Well, again, thank you for being here. These are insane times, and I think that's what religion is all about, not being defined by your externals, finding a depth within yourself that's strong enough and joyful enough to make life worth living. So as you go out today, remember that Shemá. Put it on your forehead, put it on your tassels. Whatever happens, love with all of your heart, all of your mind, and all of your strength. And we will get through this storm together. Go in peace.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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