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Pentecost 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“The Sword and Cross Bring Life”

Text: Matthew 10:34-42 (Romans 6:1b-11)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes you just have to say what you mean. There’s no sense beating around the bush, or trying to make something sound nice. You just have to say it. And so Jesus, as we heard today: **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”** Do not think, Jesus has to say here, because – be honest! – this is often exactly what we do think, isn’t it? That the good Christian life will be a life of peace. That if I do what I am supposed to do, and remain faithful, then God will bless my efforts, provide for me, and give me peace. After all, He is the promised “Prince of Peace.” The angels sang at His birth, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” . . . But guess what Jesus tells His disciples as they are about to go out and proclaim His kingdom? Do not think this! **“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”**

So why is this? Why does Jesus bring a sword? Because in order to save us, Jesus must first separate us from all that we fear, love, and trust in this world, so that we fear, love, and trust in Him alone. To be sure, all that we have in this world and life are gifts from Him, and we have nothing that did not come from our gracious God. But the gifts must not surpass the Giver in our hearts. And while this is true of all of God’s gifts to us, here Jesus mentions family in particular, which perhaps makes these verses even more scandalous! But Jesus did not pull these verses out of a vacuum and plop them down here in Matthew! There’s a reason why He chose to mention families, and it is because He is here quoting verses from the Old Testament prophet Micah, who, some 700 years earlier said,

***“Put no trust in a neighbor; have no confidence in a friend;
guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms;
for the son treats the father with contempt,
the daughter rises up against her mother,
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
a man’s enemies are the men of his own house.
But as for me, I will look to the LORD;
I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.”***

And you heard in those verses what Jesus here says in Matthew. But by saying here that He has come to ***“set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother,”*** Jesus is not saying that He wants to be a home wrecker or a destroyer of families! That is not what God desires. In fact, the fourth commandment is to protect God’s gift of families. But by quoting these verses, that this is what He has come *to set in motion*, Jesus is saying that the salvation that Micah was waiting for has arrived in Him. For Micah said do not trust in neighbors, friends, of family – these will all let you down! As strong as your family ties may be, they will all eventually let you down. They must. For even if they remain faithful all through their lives, they cannot help you after they have gone to the grave, or after you do. Neighbors, friends, and family – in fact, we hear of betrayals by these in the news all the time. But put no trust in them, says Micah. ***“But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.”***

And God has heard, for indeed ***“the God of our salvation”*** is standing before the disciples in the person of Jesus Christ. He has come to help His people. And He alone is worthy of our trust. Where others fail us, our Saviour does not. . . . Yet that is not often how it seems, is it? When hardships come, when diseases strike, it is easy to get discouraged and think that God has let us down. He has not given us what we need, or provided for us. But is that, in fact, the truth? Or have we grown reliant on that which we should not? Have we begun to fear, love, and trust the gifts instead of the Giver? And therefore is our gracious God using a sword to save us by separating us from that which is actually harming us? We want peace and health and life and happiness, but at what price?

But the price is what our Saviour has come to pay. ***“The God of our salvation”*** has come in the person of Jesus Christ to pay the price, the ransom, for our life. To lay down His life on the cross for our sins, to separate us from our sins – ***“as far as the east is from the west”*** – and give us life. *And so for us and for our salvation He came down from Heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.* And as a man He joined us in our humanity, so that we could partake of His divinity. So that we could not only be saved by grace through the forgiveness of our sins, but so that we could live a new life in Him. Not trusting in our earthly fathers, but having a Heavenly Father. Not trusting in our earthly mothers, but having a new mother in the Church. Not trusting in our brothers and sisters, but having a new brother in Christ. . . . Are we worthy of such honor? To be called sons of God and brothers of Christ? Not at all. ***“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”*** We do fail in our devotion, in our fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Yet the worthiness of Christ is greater than our unworthiness. The love of Christ greater than our sin. And so in Christ, although we are not worthy, still our Father calls us His sons. Constantly forgiving us and restoring us to our rightful place in His family.

And this He does through the cross – the cross of Christ and the cross which He places upon

each of us. For as Jesus continues, ***“And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*** The cross is God’s gracious means of restoration. For only through the death and resurrection of Jesus do we have the forgiveness of our sin and restoration of life. And by bearing the cross that we have been given, we share in the death and resurrection of Christ. . . . You see, there is a lot of misunderstanding about what it means to “bear the cross.” Many people think that to “bear the cross” is simply another way of talking about suffering in this life, and some try to choose their own crosses to bear. But when you talked about the cross back in the time of Jesus, it meant only one thing: death. The cross was intended to kill you. And if you were carrying a cross, you were going to die. You were going to the place of your execution, as Jesus carried His cross to Calvary. And so when Jesus here talks about you “bearing your cross,” He is not talking about some burden that He wants you to bear, or some suffering He wants you to endure – that’s not what Jesus is all about! He is talking about your death! Your death and resurrection *with Him*, so that you can rise to a new life.

And that’s what St. Paul was writing about in the Epistle from Romans – and notice again that God has to here tell us what to think! ***“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*** And that is the goal of all that Jesus came and did for us – that we might die and rise again. Die to sin, and live in Him. Die to our old way of life and live a new life. Die to reliance in ourselves and what we can do, and rise to rely on Him and what He has done for us. And that is exactly what happened when you were baptized. You died and rose with your Saviour. . . . And so now you also bear the cross in order that this dying and rising might be a daily occurrence for you in your life. And so we are given the cross not to burden us or just to make us suffer, but that the sin in us might be killed daily by repentance, and a new man arise in forgiveness. And that is why Luther wrote of baptism, *“What does such baptizing with water indicate?”* Answer: *“It indicates that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”*

And so to do this, Christ draws the sword – the sword of His Word. And through His Word, through baptism, through repentance and the cross, He separates us from our sin and gives us a new life through His forgiveness. Peace with the world, peace while still living in our sin, peace while trusting those who cannot save – what kind peace is that? It is the peace of the world, which as we see over and over and over again, is frail and fleeting, a chasing after the wind. A peace which never lasts. But through the cross and the sword, Jesus has come to give us a peace that lasts forever. A peace where, just as we think we are losing our life, we find it. For our life is now hidden with God in Christ.

And so this is now the message that the disciples are going out to proclaim. And it is not going to be easy. These are hard words, and in their day and in ours, many do not want such a Saviour, and many do not want to hear this message of salvation. But we are not to be discouraged. For Christ ends here with some wonderful promises: ***“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”*** And we here we see the close and intimate union that Christ has established with His own! For Christ is the prophet *par excellence*; the prophet from whom all prophets receive their words. Christ is the righteous one, from whom all righteousness comes. He even identifies Himself with these little ones, when He said, ***“when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink . . . whatever you do to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”*** And the reward comes from Him, for it is His reward. The reward He earned for us through His death and resurrection, and now gives to us and through us to others. And as we come and kneel at the Table of our Saviour, unworthy as we are, He makes us worthy as He joins Himself to us in His body, cleanses us with His blood, and gives us a foretaste of the feast to come.

And so this is now the message that the disciples are going out to proclaim. And it is the message which the Church still proclaims. A message of sword and cross and death in a world that is dying but doesn't know it. But it is also a message of life and forgiveness and salvation to a world that is dying to live. Looking for life and meaning and purpose, but not knowing what such a life looks like or where to find it. And so the disciples and the Church are sent, as Jesus was sent, to show this life. This life found in the most unusual place – the cross. For in the cross Jesus brings us life in abundance. And bearing our cross, we find out and show to the world what that life is all about.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.