

8 September 2002
Pentecost 16 – Sept. 11 Anniversary

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“Only One Answer”

Text: Matthew 18:20 (Romans 13:10; Ezekiel 33:7-9)

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

We are now three days shy of the one year anniversary of September 11th. TV, newspapers, radio, and all forms of the media are going to be inundated with retrospectives, evaluating that day and the year that has passed since. And to be sure, since that day some things have changed, but much has also stayed the same. Some things in our world are better, but some things are worse. Many still live with a sense and feeling of pain and loss, while for others life has gone back to normal. . . .

But what cannot be disputed is that since that day there has been an enormous confusion – not new, but brought to light once again by the horror of these attacks. And it is an enormous confusion brought on by a multitude of voices all offering different opinions, questions, answers, and reasons for what took place, why it took place, the nature of man, the ways of God, and what we can do to fix what has become of our world today. . . . But take a look around – are we really “stronger now than we were before?” Are we really “better now than we were before?” Have we really fixed anything? No. And we won’t, because we can’t.

What happened September 11th is not, contrary to what you have heard so many times, an extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime event. Perhaps in *magnitude*, yes, it was. I suppose only time will tell if that’s a true statement or not. But in reality, and more important, theologically, as we consider our world, and what’s wrong with it, and the problems that we face everyday – both big and small – September 11th was only another symptom of a much larger and more serious problem that infects us all. And that is sin. And on September 11th we saw sin – and not just because there were terrorist acts – but because death is sin rendered visible. And on that day death came home to roost in a way that most of us are not used to. But as horrible and untimely as those deaths were, we must remember, so are the deaths that happen everyday. The quick and sudden deaths of loved ones taken by crime. The slow and painful deaths of loved ones taken by disease. The tragic deaths of those taken by accident. . . . Death is not natural. Death was never meant to be. Death is the wages of sin. And so on September 11th, we saw sin – only more up close and personal than many had seen it before.

And so since September 11th there has been an enormous confusion in our country and in the world, evidenced by people asking questions such as, “Why did this happen? Where was God? Was God punishing us?” I’m sure you heard those questions. Maybe you even asked them yourself. And I’m sure you heard a great many and diverse answers to those questions. But almost all the answers to those questions fell short and missed the mark because people were looking not at the cause of all this, at the disease, but only at the symptoms. And most of the fixes and solutions that were suggested were aimed at treating the symptoms and not the cause. It is the same as if you had a great deal of pain because of cancer – you can treat the symptom by taking pain killers to make you feel better, and you probably will feel better, but you haven’t touched the disease. And isn’t that what we see has happened in our country, not only but especially this past year? We’re trying to make ourselves feel better, and to some extent perhaps we have – but the disease is still there. Sin is still there. Death is still there. We haven’t fixed anything. And we won’t, because we can’t.

Because sin is incurable! You can’t cut it out, it won’t go into remission, there is no medicine that can make it go away. It is the disease that you have, and the person beside you has, and the whole world has. It is as we confessed in the liturgy this evening, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” And you are stuck with this disease until you die. And that’s the only time you will be free from sin – when you die. When sin reaches its conclusion and its wages are paid. . . . But to a world that denies the reality and seriousness of sin, what we saw on September 11th then defies explanation, and therefore creates confusion.

But to this confusion of voices and opinion and questions God has a message to speak, and therefore the Church has a message to speak, and therefore you and I have a message to speak. And it is not a new message because it is not a new problem! It is the same problem that has been since Satan injected this disease into all of us through Adam. And so our message is not about how to deal with the symptoms, but how to deal with the disease; how to deal with sin and death. It is the message of the cross. For there too, sin was made visible in death. There we see sin – our sin – crushing the perfect, innocent, sinless, Son of God. There we see Jesus dying for the guilt of our sin. . . . On September 11th you heard it said that *so many* innocent people died. Politically speaking, that is true. Theologically speaking, it is not. There was only ever one person who was innocent of all sin and yet had to pay the wages of sin in death. And that was Jesus. He was the truly innocent one into whom Satan crashed all of His strength, and for three days it looked as if that tower had fallen. But on Sunday morning, when the tumult settled and the dust cleared and the women went in to look for the body, they did not find what they expected. They did not find a body. They did not find death. They found life! And death was defeated. It was as Jesus had said, “***Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.***”

And so now there is a place of safety for us. A tower of strength that can withstand all the assaults and attacks of the devil and will not fall, and that is in Christ – in His death and resurrection. And so He is calling to us to die with Him. To die now, so we will not die later. To get death over with so that we can now live our lives in freedom and with a confident hope in the future. . . . For isn't that what so many are looking for? So many, since September 11th, are worried about the future, are worried about death, are worried about future attacks and troubles and what lies ahead. But in Christ death is done, the guilt of our sin is forgiven, and our future is secure. In Christ we have the confidence and security that so many are searching for! In Christ, we know that however and whenever death comes upon us, and whether it is sudden or slow, that death will not, and cannot, win. That it is not the end. ***“For,”*** as St. Paul writes, ***“if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.”***

And so we have a message to speak – a message of hope and security. A message for even when bad things happen to good people. For the cross teaches us that we don't always know how to judge whether something is good or evil; we don't always know what should and shouldn't be; we don't know that much at all. . . . For as we focus on the cross, we see the categories of “good” and “evil” demolished. For how do you judge the cross? Was it “good” or “evil?” ***Yes.*** The evil of the cross is the good of our salvation. The miscarriage of Roman justice is God's justice for the sins of the world. The rejection of Christ by the world is God's reconciliation of the world. The innocent Sufferer is the sacrificial Lamb who takes away the world's sin. The cross is both the cursed tree and the tree of life. The punishment for our sin and the atonement for our sin. The cross is both Law and Gospel. The cross is “evil” used for “good.”

And so in the cross we see the God who hides life in death, victory in defeat, power in weakness. He buries His divinity deeply in our humanity, and then suffers, dies, and rises to save the world. In the cross, we see most clearly “God for us” – not in glory, but when He is forsaken and afflicted in suffering. In the cross, we see that through suffering and death comes life. In the cross, we see that God's will is always a good and gracious will to save, even when it seems otherwise. Evil is a problem for us, but it is not a problem for God. He has already defeated it. He has already won. It is not out of His control. Nothing is wrong with Him. No. If we suffer now, it is for our good. If we endure evil now, it is for our good. If we die now, it is for our good. Even though we do not have all the answers, even though we cannot understand all that we see happening around us, faith and trust do not rely on understanding, but rise above it. The cross teaches us that there is life in the midst of death, and that God knows our suffering and our pain. For on the cross He embraced us in our suffering and pain, so that through it we might have eternal life.

And that is the strange and unique message that we have for the world. That faith that does

not know all the answers, but answers the call to die and live with our Saviour who died and lives for us. And so we are joined with our Saviour's death and resurrection in **Holy Baptism**, and we get death over with as we are re-born to a new life in Christ that never ends. We are joined with our Saviour's death and resurrection in **Holy Communion** as we partake of the fruits of His suffering and death, His very body and blood, and are sustained by Him through the suffering of this world. And we are joined with our Saviour's death and resurrection as we fall before Him in **repentance**, returning to our baptism to drown the old, sinful man in us, so that through the free and full forgiveness of our Saviour a new man might arise and live before God in righteousness and purity forever. And living that life, for the Christian every day is a day of death and resurrection in Christ, so that when that day does finally come when we are taken from this life in death, it will be a day we have been practicing for, and are ready for. It is a day we need not fear. For we have already died with Christ; therefore we know that we will also live with Him.

And so this is the message that we proclaim to the world. The message that God told the prophet Ezekiel to proclaim. The message that if we truly love our neighbor, we will proclaim. To not speak this truth and to tolerate error and false religion is not love, it is the opposite. But to speak this truth is life and freedom and love. And Christ is among us in this proclamation of the truth . . . in this message of reconciliation . . . this message of death and resurrection. ***"Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I in the midst of them."*** He is with us in our suffering. He is with us in our pain. He is with us with His grace that is sufficient for us.

Feel good and feel better solutions don't work! If 9-11 has taught us anything, it has taught us that. The only answer is the cross. Where we see that God is not far from us, but has come to be with us. That God is not punishing us, but has forgiven us. That God uses even what is evil for His good. And that even in suffering and pain, the love of God is working – for us and for our salvation.

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

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