

16 February 2003
Epiphany 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Run to the Altar!”
Text: Mark 1:40-45

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

It is not uncommon to hear the Holy Gospel that we heard this evening explained in the following way. There was a leper. He asked Jesus to heal him, and Jesus did. Jesus didn't want him to tell anybody about it, but the former-leper was so happy and joyous that he couldn't contain himself and instead of keeping silent, told *everyone* what had happened to him! And so too we, having received Jesus' cleansing of forgiveness should be the same way, and act just as this leper did. So get out there and spread the word! Amen.

Now I'm going to make a pretty radical statement about that interpretation of this reading: it is completely wrong. Oh, there are some truths contained in that explanation, which is what makes it sound good, but also what makes it so *dangerous*. Because it is never okay to disobey the Word of the Lord. I don't care what your justification is, I don't care how happy you are, I don't care how much good you think it is doing – it is never okay to disobey the Word of the Lord. And that's what this leper did, against Jesus' *stern* warning. For Jesus didn't just politely ask him to keep this under wraps for a little while, or suggest that this might be the way to go – “**Jesus sternly charged him!**” Yet this leper thought he knew better, and did what he wanted to do instead. And I'm sorry, I just don't think we should hold that up as an example that we are to follow!

For if we do, where will it end? If it's okay to disobey the Word of the Lord in the name of evangelism, or missions, or spreading the word, then do you see what we have done? We have made an idol. An idol that comes before the Lord. And while it may be for what we would consider a “good cause,” we are still placing what we do ahead of the Lord and His Word. And if it's okay to disobey the Word of the Lord for this “good” cause, then for what other “good” causes also? And who gets to decide? And we have opened up a can of worms that we really don't want open! Yet this is exactly what's being done in many corners of the Church today: the Words of our Lord are being set aside, because we think we know better. Because we think we can do better. Because we do what we want to do instead. But this simply won't do.

Take, for example, Naaman in the Old Testament reading. He too was a leper, and notice that he too thought he knew better than what he had been told by God's spokesman, the prophet Elisha. For when Elisha tells him to ***“go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean,”*** Naaman thought that was pretty stupid! And he got angry and thought that there had to be a much better way to do things! And if he was going to have to wash in a river, it certainly wasn't going to be the Jordan! The rivers in Damascus were much better than that crummy old river. . . . And while that evaluation of the quality of water may in fact have been true, there was only one source of healing for Naaman, and it had nothing to do with whose river was better. It was the Word of the Lord and the power of that Word. Whether or not there may have been a better way really didn't matter. This was the Word of the Lord. This was His means for healing. And by going to the means that God had given, Naaman was healed.

Now back to the leper in the Holy Gospel – what was it that Jesus told him to do? Where was he to go? He was to go to the Temple, and to the priests, and offer the sacrifice of atonement and cleansing as prescribed in the Law. And that's significant. Because the Temple and the sacrifices there were the means that God had given His people for their cleansing and forgiveness. They weren't optional. Yes, Jesus was God in the flesh, the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sin of the world by His sacrifice on the cross, but He had not yet ascended the cross. He had not yet fulfilled and accomplished what all the Temple sacrifices pointed to. And so He didn't tell the leper, *“Yes, God has healed you and you have Jesus in your heart, so you don't need all that other.”* No! Both His Word and His means are important, and go together. His Word leads to the altar, and the altar to His Word. And so He points the former-leper to the Temple, to the altar, to the blood of atonement and cleansing.

And that is really what happens here in this place each and every Sunday. You and I are sick and diseased with the leprosy of sin, which if left untreated would kill us both physically and spiritually. And so we come here, in the presence of Jesus, and like the leper, we come ***“imploing Him, and kneeling [and saying to Him,] ‘If you will, you can make me clean.’”*** Confessing our sin and uncleanness. *“I, a poor, miserable sinner.”* And Jesus says to us, ***“I will; be clean.”*** *“I forgive you all your sins.”* And with that declaration, we are, just like the leper, completely and totally healed and forgiven. But we don't then immediately sing a praise song and go running out of here! No, Jesus isn't done with us yet. He has even more for us. His Word leads to the altar, and He leads us to His altar, to the blood of atonement, which we then receive. The very body and blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And then – having received the fullness of His gifts to us, in the means He has given to us – we then go out with His blessing, to live out our vocations in the world. And that includes

evangelism, and missions, and spreading the Word. Those are all good things! But first things first! The Word of the Lord, His washing, His meal. His gifts. His blood and presence, His forgiveness and atonement.

St. Paul, in the Epistle reading, spoke about our life as a race that is being run. **“So,”** he says, **“run that you may obtain the prize.”** Good advice! But he adds another important phrase: **“I do not run aimlessly . . . lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”** First of all, realize that St. Paul is talking about Christians here. About you and I who have heard the Word of the Lord and have been given life. For before that, before God comes to us, we do not have the ability to run anywhere! We are born dead in our trespasses and sins. And so it is to those who have been given life that Paul is speaking to here. People like the leper in the Holy Gospel. In faith he goes to Jesus. In faith he confesses that Jesus can heal him. In faith he receives that healing. But then instead of running to obtain the prize, running to the Temple, where Jesus has instructed him to go, he begins to run aimlessly – here, there, and everywhere – *thinking* he was doing good, when, in fact, he was negatively impacting Jesus, **“so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town.”** And I wonder if these words of St. Paul are not what happened to the leper . . . **“lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”**

“Run that you may obtain the prize.” And so that we might do that Jesus has not left us to our own devices, to try to figure out things on our own, to do what we think is best, to do whatever we think should be done. No, because our thinking is fallen and sinful. We don’t know what’s best. We can’t figure things out on our own. If left to ourselves, we would either only run in circles at best, or at worst forgot where we’ve been and run backwards! And so Jesus has laid out the race before us. It is the road of the cross. The road of repentance and humility. The road which leads us here to His Word and altar, to receive His forgiveness, to receive His cleansing, to receive His nourishment, to receive His life. And then we go out and live that life. And we return to again receive His gifts. And although it may seem, and perhaps *often* seem, that we’re not really getting anywhere, in this cycle of going out and returning, we are. For it is His race, and this is where and how He has told us to run. And although we may think we know better, and think we can do better, by doing what we think and want to do instead – no. To run in any other way is to run aimlessly. But to run to here and from here is to **“run to obtain the prize.”** And as we run this race in this way, and invite those around us to do the same, we will be evangelizing, and doing missions, and spreading the Word. And showing others where to find healing and forgiveness and Jesus Himself – not in their own hearts, but where He has promised to be.

But also notice one other thing about this reading – and that is the *graciousness* of Jesus.

That even though this leper did not go to the Temple and offer the sacrifices, that even though he made things more difficult for Jesus, Jesus did not take back His healing. Jesus did not give him back his leprosy and say, “*See, if you do not obey, then I take back my blessings!*” No. When Jesus gives, He gives. He gives graciously and generously. The Law does not follow the Gospel as a condition for receiving the Gospel. . . . And so for lepers like you and I, what wonderful news that is! For the cleansing we have received from God, the declaration of sins forgiven, the promise of eternal life in Heaven, will not be taken back! Even though we sometimes act like this leper, the gifts of God remain for us, and are here for us.

And so we run the race that has been set before us, and run where Jesus has told us to run, and that is to His Altar. For there is the fullness of His gifts for us. There is the cross and the body and blood of our Saviour. There is our life. There is our atonement and cleansing.

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

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