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Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Dependent and Free”

Text: Luke 9:18-24

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

228 years ago in this country, there was a revolution. A revolution for independence, which we will celebrate again this day, the Fourth of July. . . . But *today*, there is also *another* revolution going on – also for independence – except this is not a *political* revolution – it is a cultural, a moral, a religious, revolution. And that makes this revolution, in many ways, much more dangerous than any other.

For this is a revolution that is challenging the very foundations of our society, stating that there is no absolute truth upon which we stand, and upon which our life together is defined. No, your culture, your morality, your religion is what you want it to be. All gods are equal, all lifestyles are equal, all choices are equal. None are wrong and none are right, they simply are what you want the truth to be. Or in other words, you are *independent*. No one and no god can tell you who to be, or what is truth. You are *independent*. You are free – and freedom is a good thing, is it not? . . . Except the freedom that this revolution promises is really no freedom at all, but in fact, a stronger slavery to sin. And many people, seeking to be “free,” are actually sinking into this slavery deeper and deeper. Addiction, dysfunction, confusion, denial, anger, loneliness, hopelessness – these are just a few of the symptoms. And even with these, people *think* they’re going the right way; that they’re headed in the right direction! . . . But it isn’t working. This revolution promises everything, but delivers nothing.

But this is, in fact, not a new thing. This kind of revolution has been going on ever since the beginning. Men and women, declaring their independence. Throwing off restraints. Rebelling against authority. Pursuing freedom. Going their own ways, following their own desires. From Adam and Eve down to you and I today, the story is the same. . . . Yet the result has not been freedom or independence, but stronger and deeper bondage to sin. And its like quicksand – the harder we fight, the deeper in we get.

And so *unlike* the revolution of 1776 that we are celebrating this Independence Day, this is a revolution that we can’t win. And so it is as we heard Jesus say in the Holy Gospel:

**“Whoever would save his life will lose it.”** If we insist of saving ourselves, and freeing ourselves, and declaring ourselves independent from God and anyone else, we will, in fact, have lost. . . . **“But** [Jesus continues] **whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”** But if we lay down our lives in repentance, in faith, and in dependence upon God, *then* we are free; we are forgiven; we are heirs of eternal life. . . . And so this statement of Jesus, which *sounds* so backwards and upside-down, actually shows us that we are the ones not right; we are the ones who need correcting; we are the ones who need to be put right again. And the one and only way that can be done is through the cross of Christ.

And that is what Jesus is explaining to His disciples in the Holy Gospel. **“Who do the crowds say that I am?”** He asked. And there is a variety of answers – all, by the way, holding Jesus in very high regard and esteem; equating Him with prophets and holy men of old. And yet at the same time, all are inadequate; all missing something. . . . But when Peter then gives the correct answer, **“You are the Christ of God”** – or in other words, you are the anointed One; the One God sent into the world to save – Jesus not only acknowledges this, but immediately grounds this answer where it must be grounded: *at the cross*. For we cannot rightly know Jesus as the Christ apart from the cross. And that is why He charged His disciples not to tell anyone . . . yet. For the people were looking for a Saviour who would give them *independence* – freedom from the Romans, and if they heard that Jesus was the Christ they would make Him King and expect Him to do this. They would want a cross-less Christ.

But, in fact, there is no such thing. And so, Jesus says, **“The Son of Man must suffer . . . many things . . . and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”** On this we are dependent. Jesus did not use that word “must” lightly. There was no other way. His death and resurrection are the only means by which we can be truly free. Only Christ’s death and resurrection can break the hold of sin on each of us, and clean out the skeletons in our closets. Only Christ’s death and resurrection can give us hope beyond the grave. Only Christ’s death and resurrection can defeat Satan, and all His works and all His ways; He is too strong, too wily, too persistent for us. And so while being independent may *sound* good, it is only until sin bears its fangs against us again, and those skeletons come back to haunt us. Or until the emptiness of the grave looms over us, at the death of a loved one, or in the face of terrorism or disease. Or until Satan begins whispering in your ear and driving you to despair. Independence *sounds good* until . . . And it doesn’t take long being out on your own to realize that there are bills to be paid, and you can’t pay them.

Only Christ’s death can pay the price for the debt of sin that we have rung up, and only His resurrection can give us a new life. The answer to the freedom that we seek is not to throw off the shackles we think have been put upon us, to rebel and redefine what it

means to be spiritual. No, the answer (as the prophet Zechariah said) is to turn to the one who was shackled for us, who was nailed to the cross, and who do not rebel. To turn to the one ***“whom they have pierced,”*** to that bloody, humiliated, corpse on the cross, and confess, ***“You are the Christ of God.”*** You are my Saviour. For only joined to Him can our shackles be removed. Only He holds the key to the kingdom of Heaven. Only by being dependent upon Him can we be set free.

You see, that is part of the problem. We think that being independent and being free must go together; that we can't be free unless we're independent. But it is not so. Jesus is telling us that dependence and freedom do in fact go together – maybe not politically, but certainly spiritually. For only as we live dependent on Him can we be free.

And that is where the *other* cross of which Jesus spoke comes in. For it is not only in His own cross that Jesus grounds Peter's answer – but also in the cross that He places upon each of us. For Jesus goes on to say, ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”*** If we keep to the mindset that independence and freedom must go together, then we can and will never understand why a loving God would put crosses, struggles, difficulties, and challenges to our faith into our lives. For wouldn't a loving God take these things away from us? Wouldn't a loving God want to take better care of us and make our life easier? But with such questions, we are falling into the same trap as those who lived at Jesus' time, *who wanted a cross-less Christ*. And so your Heavenly Father gives you crosses to bear not because He doesn't love you, and not because He likes to watch you suffer, and not for any other reason than to by that cross drive you to the cross of His Son. For if by the cross He places upon us God makes us dependent on Christ, then He has not, in fact, burdened us, but really set us free. ***“For whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”***

And so it is exactly the struggles of life that drive us to the source of our life. It is the challenges to our faith that drive us to the source of our faith. It is the difficulties to love and forgive that drive us to the source of our love and forgiveness. That brought to our knees, seeing our neediness, and realizing our dependence, we drink deeply from the Word of God, we wash and rejoice in the waters of our baptism, and we feed hungrily at the table of our Lord's body and blood. For in those means are the fruits of the cross of Christ. In those means are His forgiveness, life, and salvation. In those means we are joined to Christ, and He to us, and we are set free. Set free in dependence on Him.

And thus set free, we can finally live. Live free from the burden to be perfect, for we know we are not. Live free from the burden of our sin, for we know it is forgiven. And live free from fear, for we know that in Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God. . . . And in a world searching for answers, and for freedom, if that's not

*revolutionary*, I don't know what is!

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.