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Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Living the Christ Life”

Text: John 14:15-21

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

In the Holy Gospel that we heard this morning, Jesus said: ***If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*** That statement is not a command to us from Jesus, telling us that is what we ought to do as Christians. It is rather a statement of fact. It is a description of reality. *Jesus is teaching that love shapes who we are and what we do.* Love isn't lazy, and it isn't invisible. Love always acts, and if we could love perfectly, our entire life would be a doing of His commandments. (Rom 13:10) Because they are really a description of perfect love. The First Table, the first three commandments, tell us of perfect love toward God – what it means to ***love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*** (Mt 22:37) And the Second Table, commandments four through ten, tell us of perfect love toward our neighbor – what it means to ***love your neighbor as yourself.*** (Mt 22:39) And so if we could love perfectly, this is what we would do. This is what our life would look like. We would automatically keep all of the commandments. They are a description of the Christian life.

The question for us today is: are they a description of your life?

If we are honest, the answer is **no**. If we are honest, then we meant what we said when we confessed earlier: *Most merciful God . . . we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.* We have failed both halves of the commandments. We have failed each and every commandment. We do not and have not lived the Christian life, because we cannot love perfectly. Because of original sin, the sin that we are born with, the commandments, the Christian life, are beyond our reach. This is the difficulty Luther found himself in, and which caused him to write in the hymn that we just sang (LW #353) that he was “bound in Satan’s chains,” and “suffered the pangs of hell.” He tried to do what God commanded! But he couldn't. Neither can we.

So where does that leave us? Well actually, and perhaps ironically, that leaves us right where we need to be! For acknowledging our sin and inability and failure *is the first step* in living the Christian life. To look at the commandments and see in them a standard that

we cannot attain is to receive them and know them exactly as God intended! For God's Law was never meant to be a life-giving thing, but rather the way to show us our sin; to show us our need; to show us our failure; to show us our *lack* of love and life; to show us that on our own, we cannot live this Christian life, no matter how hard we try. And when we acknowledge that truth, we are right where God wants us to be. For when we are dead in our trespasses and sins, **then God gives us life**. True life. *The Christian life*.

And you see, that's the key – to understand that the Christian life is not something that we are able to do or accomplish, but that it is, in fact, **a gift from God**. A gift of His grace. And this is what made the difference for Luther, and changed the verses of his hymn from despair into joy! His awful, heavy burden was lifted by this good news – that the Christian life was not what he did, but what God was doing for him! It was a gift of God's grace.

And so in the Holy Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples *where* this life comes from, when He says to them: ***Because I live, you also will live***. Or in other words, our life is grounded in His life. Apart from Him, we have no real life. But because He lives, we live. Because He died and rose again, we who are born without life and love also rise to a new life in Him. And so **gifted** with life by and in Jesus, we then begin to love and live as He loved and lived – to live **the Christ life**, the Christian life.

And *how* this happens Jesus also tells His disciples. For after describing the Christian life, He then tells them how it will come about. And it is not from anything they do, but rather from what He will do: ***And I, I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, . . . He dwells with you and will be in you***. Another Helper, Jesus says. For the first Helper was Jesus Himself. The Son of God become man, to take our sins, die with them on the cross, and rise to life again. This work of Jesus conquering our sin, our death, and our enemy the devil, **earned** for us the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of new and eternal life. And this new life is what we are celebrating this whole Easter season.

But though Jesus *earned* this gift for us, **that is not enough** – if it is not also then a gift *given* to us. Just as a Christmas gift purchased and wrapped, but then never taken out of the closet and put under the tree is incomplete – so too with the salvation and redemption earned by Jesus on the cross. It must also be given to us. And so, Jesus says, I will send *another* Helper. And this One will give what I have earned. This One will join you to me. This One will be, as we confess in the Creed, **the Lord and giver of life**. The Lord, for He is God Himself, and the giver of the life that Jesus accomplished for us in His death and resurrection. And on the Day of Pentecost, these words of Jesus came true, as He asked His Father, and He sent to His Church His Holy Spirit.

And this is the gift of God that has been given to you. The Holy Spirit given to you in the gift of Holy Baptism, where He joins you to Jesus' death and resurrection and gives you *a new life, a Christ life, a Christian life*. The Holy Spirit given to you through His Word and the gift of Holy Absolution, where through the declaration of the forgiveness of all your sins He gives you *new life, Christ life, Christian life*. And the Holy Spirit given to you in the gift of Holy Communion, where eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus, He strengthens and keeps you in this *new life, Christ life, Christian life*. And notice that the Holy Spirit is a gift not just given once, and then we are left on our own to live, and take care of, and sustain this Christian life. No! For you know that is impossible! You know how much you continue to sin, and fall away, and fail to live this Christ life. As we considered at the beginning of this sermon, we do not keep the commandments. They do not describe our life. We fall and we fail, you know it and I know it. And so the Holy Spirit is the gift that *keeps on giving*. He keeps giving forgiveness. He keeps giving life. He keeps giving Christ. He is not here today and gone tomorrow, but as Jesus said, ***He dwells with you and will be in you***. Jesus does ***not leave us as orphans***. He comes to us, and His Spirit comes to us, and through them the Father too lives in us. And then we have life, *new life, Christ life, Christian life*.

And this is the life that we are now privileged to live. It is not a life of perfection, or of ever-increasing holiness – as if we have something to be proud of! Our sinful urges still get the best of us. Our sinful flesh and the allurements of the world make us want to live the *High Life* instead of the *Christ life*! And so living the Christ life is not about our **achieving** perfection or holiness – something that we cannot do! – but about our **receiving** Christ's holiness and perfection. The Christ life is a life begun, continued, and ended in the death and resurrection of Jesus. A life of constant dying in repentance and confession, and being given *new life* in the forgiveness of our sins. And as we ***live and move and have our being*** (Acts 17:28) in Christ, in the gift of His life and Spirit, breathing His Word and receiving life from Him, then the life and love of Christ will be evident in your life. And with His love, you will begin to keep His commandments. Loving, and serving, and sacrificing. Laying down your life, and giving, and going out of your way for others. Not because you have to, but because you love. And not because you have to do this to merit anything before God – for He has already given you all that He is and all that He has. He has already given His Son to die on the cross for you, and His Spirit to dwell in you, and the promise of eternal life in His Kingdom – what more could He give? No, you will begin to do these things because that is who you are. A child of God, living His life, a new life, a Christ life.

In the Collect for the Day, we prayed that the Lord would teach us “rightly to pray.” And so our Lord has. And that we might live the life that He has given us, He has taught us to

pray in the Lord's Prayer *Thy kingdom come*. With these words we are not just praying that God's kingdom would come at the end of time, but that it would come specifically to us here and now. His kingdom of grace and love and forgiveness in His Son. And how does this Kingdom of God come here and now? The Small Catechism tells us the answer, in words similar to those Jesus spoke here: *God's kingdom comes when our Heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace, we believe His Holy Word and lead godly lives, here in time and there in eternity.*

God's Kingdom comes when we are gifted with the Holy Spirit. That's how it all begins, and ends. **The Spirit of truth** leads us into the truth of God's Word, and we believe. **The Spirit of life** gives us the life of God, and we live. And this life, this new life of forgiveness, this Christ life, we live not only here in time, but will live forever in eternity. For *because He lives, we also will live*. And that's not a command – that's a promise!

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.