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Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Crosses of Love”

Text: Mark 8:27-35; James 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-18

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

Love God. Love your neighbor.

Very simply, that is what God asks of you. It isn't very complicated. It isn't too hard to understand. But it is what we all fail to do. Because, quite frankly, we would rather love ourselves instead.

Does that sound a bit harsh? Perhaps. That's why we don't say it, but tend instead to make excuses; to claim extenuating circumstances, and busy-ness; to compare ourselves with others; and even focus on how undeserving and unlovable our neighbors are! But all of those things do not change *the fact* of our failure to love.

And our failure to love God and our neighbor is to direct our love at ourselves. What we do not give to others we keep for ourselves. What we do not do for others we do for ourselves. What we think others do not deserve we think we do.

The Epistle reading from James spoke of this failure to love when it spoke of our failure to act; to perform deeds and works of love; to back up what we say with what we do. You should have felt uncomfortable when you heard those verses read. And, in fact, not only do we not have the deeds to match our words, we often times don't even have the words! Instead turning our heads, averting our eyes, ignoring our neighbor in need, or even thinking ill of him or her in our hearts!

Love God. Love your neighbor. Is that asking too much? . . . The truth is: *we are so twisted by sin that we do not even know what love is.*

And that is why Peter, the great Apostle, answered Jesus the way he did. He had **faith** – it was **love** that he didn't understand and that he didn't recognize. And so when Jesus asked His disciples “*who do you say that I am?*” Peter had the faith to answer “*You are the Christ.*” He knew, and he believed! But then when Jesus “*began to teach them that*

the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again,” Peter was confused. Peter didn’t understand. He believed, but because Peter was so twisted by sin, he couldn’t recognize the love of God in what Jesus was beginning to teach and explain that He was going to do for them.

For when Jesus speaks of the cross, and speaks of His death and resurrection, it is the *love of God* that He is speaking of. The perfect love of God. The self-sacrificing love of God. The love of God that would rather He die, than we die. The love of God that rather than seek excuses or explanations, sought a solution, and sent a Saviour. A Saviour to deal with our sin, with our failure to love. . . . And so the cross shows us not just the seriousness of our sin and its dreadful consequences – it also shows us the love of God. Of the God who would go there in our place, as our substitute. The God who loves not only in words, but also in deeds.

And so when Peter then rejects the cross and rebukes Jesus for speaking that way, He is, in reality, although unknowingly, rejecting God’s love.

And we too! If we reject the cross, we reject God’s love.

But what Jesus wanted His disciples to understand, and what He wants you and I today to understand, is that the cross is not something to be avoided, but that the cross is **good**. The sin that required Jesus to suffer and die there in our place is not good, but hearing of and seeing Christ on the cross tells us in no uncertain terms that God is love. And that when we approach God, we do not approach an angry, demanding judge who is dissatisfied with us and intent on meting out upon us the punishment which our sins deserve – no, we approach a God who is love, and who gave Himself for us. Who took the wages of our sin Himself, that not only would our sins be forgiven, but that we might once again know love. And knowing love, also then give that love to others.

That is what Jesus would have us see when we look at His cross. And most of you seasoned, long-time, faithful Christians are on board with that. *Yes, this is most certainly true!*

Now here’s the bombshell – that’s not the only cross Jesus speaks of! There is *another* cross. Another cross which, no less than His own cross, shows the love of God for you. And that is the cross that God places upon you. For as Jesus says – *right after* speaking of His own cross – ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*** And if we reject this cross, we are *also* rejecting God’s love.

Now *this* is something that is hard for most of us to understand! For it is one thing to accept the fact that we see God's love in the cross of Christ – it is quite another to see God's love in the crosses that He gives to us, that we have to bear. . . . For it doesn't seem to make sense that God shows His love for you through the crosses that He gives to you. Crosses of hardship, or persecution, or even suffering or pain. Those things seem to us to be the very opposite of love! Those things seem to us to be showing us God's anger and vengeance, not His love! For after all, didn't Jesus bear the cross so that *I wouldn't have to!* . . .

But remember the truth that I stated earlier: *we are so twisted by sin that we do not know what love is.* Peter didn't understand it or recognize it, and neither do we.

Now, it's true that many people today think they know what love is. And for many people today love is permissiveness and acceptance. Love is never making anyone feel bad. Love is indulging and fulfilling desires, or making people feel good about themselves. And if that's what love is then that's what a God of love should do for us!

But that's not love. Those things are selfishness *disguised* as love. . . . But God, in true and perfect love, does love. In His cross, and in our crosses. It is love that wants the best for us. And so God loves enough to do what is hard. To discipline us, to teach us, to correct and rebuke us, to direct us, to guide us, and to keep us in Him. To give us crosses to kill the sin and the selfishness in us – to ***“set our minds on the things of God, and not the things of man.”*** . . . If God didn't love us, He wouldn't care. He would simply let us go off and do whatever we want and He wouldn't bother being involved in our lives. . . . But He does care, and loves us enough to give us crosses to bear. And not a cross of your own choosing, but one of His choosing. And what that means is different for each of you. But it also means that it is a *perfect* cross, and given in *perfect* love, that hardship, or suffering, or pain, or loss now, would lead to faith and love and life with God forever in Heaven.

And once Christ teaches that, through His cross and Spirit, then faith grows and love begins. For not only do we then recognize our own sin more and more, and rely more and more on the love of Christ and His forgiveness – accomplished for us on the cross, and now given in His Word, and in His water, and in His Supper – we also begin to love as He has loved us. And we begin to see in others, in our neighbors, not burdens, but opportunities. Opportunities to love as we have been loved. To forgive as we have been forgiven. To give as we have received. To love our neighbors as ourselves and to lay down our lives, as Christ laid down His life for us.

And so just as we can rejoice in the cross of Christ and all that that means for us, so too

can we rejoice in our own crosses, and the suffering and hardship that come with them. If we try to consider and understand *our* crosses apart from *Christ's* cross, we will never understand them and even hate them, and hate God for them.

That's why Jesus keeps them together!

For in the light of Christ's cross, and the love of God shown to us there, we can see our own crosses for what they truly are – not the anger of God unleashed upon us, but the love of God being applied to us.

And so when we hear the words that we heard in the Gospel today, and that we sung right before the sermon, to ***“take up our cross,”*** our first thoughts should not be ones of dread or sorrow – that we have to do such an awful thing! Our first thought should be that we are unworthy. Unworthy of God's attention. Unworthy of His love. Unworthy of His personal care and involvement in our lives. Unworthy of the high honor of bearing a cross placed by Him. . . . And then thank Him for it! For this cross, no less than the cross of Christ, is a good thing. For the cross is **God for us. It is God loving us. It is God forgiving us. It is God saving us.**

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.

(This is a reprise of a sermon from several years ago. Time, circumstances, and the fact that I thought this a good message to proclaim compelled me to use it again, with a few modifications.)