

9 September 2007
Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Living in the Extremes”

Text: Luke 14:25-35 (Deut 30:15-20)

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

Our world doesn't like extremes, or extremists. When it comes to the weather, we want it neither too hot nor too cold. When it comes to politics, electability means being neither too far left nor too far right. When it comes to schools, give my child homework but not too much homework. Make my job challenging but not too challenging. And even (or maybe especially!) in matters of faith and religion, don't be too much of a zealot. Don't go too far to one side or the other. The middle is better. Because in the middle, you'll offend less people. Think both-and, not either-or. Not creation or evolution, but theistic evolution. Not one truth but many truths. Not one way but many ways. That's the way to go, according to the wisdom of the world.

And truthfully, we like being in the middle. Even as Christians, we've bought into this. We like being liked and not offending anyone. It's comfortable, and it's safe. Make my faith demanding but not too demanding. Needing commitment, but not too much commitment. Forgiving but not too forgiving. And Pastor, be relevant but don't hit too close to home! Don't ask too much of me, but don't ask too little. Care, but don't pry. Need me, but not too much. Isn't that, in a nutshell, our Christianity today?

Yes, we like to be in the middle, which is why today's Holy Gospel is so hard for us to hear. Such lukewarm Christianity is rejected by Jesus. According to His words, there is no middle ground. You either are or you aren't. You're in or you're out. You're in Him or you're not. It's the same distinction Moses put before the people in Deuteronomy, just before they were to enter the Promised Land: *What's it gonna be folks? Life or death? Blessing or curse? One God or many gods? . . .* Well, you know the

story. The people said one thing, but then life happened. They found out it wasn't so easy. And so they settled for the mushy middle.

And that's exactly what happens to us! We're the same as they were then, and they're the same as we are now. And so we hear these words of Jesus, of commitment, of challenge, and we're cut to the heart, and convicted, and we say: *Yes! I love the Lord! I'll do it.* And we jump in whole hog. . . . And maybe, for a while, we do okay. Until life happens. And we find out it's harder than we thought, to put God before my family; to stand firm and not cave in. It's even harder to put what He wants before what I want; the desires of the flesh I like so much. We don't want the crosses He gives us. The cost is greater than we thought. And like those today in the mortgage crunch who bought too much house and are facing foreclosure, we find ourselves in over our heads. Burned out, despairing, and ready to give up.

If we don't give up, perhaps then we move to the opposite extreme, which is sometimes called the "cheap grace" extreme. Sinning because I know I'm forgiven. Using God's sovereignty as an excuse for my laziness. Content with being a Christian with no cost at all. . . . But we know that's not right either. And so we finally settle into the mushy middle, where we become satisfied Christians, bored Christians, and neutered, unsalty Christians. Which is just how Satan likes it.

Jesus knows the danger of this middle ground and how deadly it is, both for us and for those outside the church. For us, because it's a deadly mishmash of truth and error; and for those outside the church because they see in us the wishy-washy, flip-flopping wafflers they so despise in politicians.

So what are we to do? If the middle is not right, nor either extreme, how *do* we then live as Christians? How *can* we be Jesus' disciples?

Well, the answer is not to live at one extreme or the other with Jesus, or to mash them together in the middle, but to live in *both* extremes at the same time. That is something quite different than the middle, which dilutes and tames both the Law of God and the Gospel of God, and stirs them into a mishmash of lukewarm, unrecognizable Christianity that is really no Christianity at all! Instead, to live in both extremes is to neither dilute nor tame either the Law or the Gospel, but keeps them both in their timeless truth and purity. To live in the extreme of the Law

which demands everything from us; *and* to live in the extreme of the Gospel which demands nothing from us. To live in the extreme of the Law, which crushes us and brings us to despair of our own efforts; and to live in the extreme of the Gospel, which gives us the life and hope and forgiveness we need. Or in other words: to be a Christian takes everything, and it takes nothing.

And where we see this truth displayed for us most vividly is the cross. **The cross which cost Jesus everything.** For Jesus is the One who counted the cost to build the tower, fortress, and refuge of the Church, and came to pay that cost in our place. Leaving His throne in Heaven, being born of a virgin, being despised and rejected by men, and then drinking the cup of God's wrath against our sin and dying our death. He is the King who came to battle the armies of the prince of this world, asking not for peace, but warring against them and winning the fight we could not win. He is the One who loved us more than His own life, and so gave His life that we might live. And His "*It is finished*" on the cross indicated that it was: all that was necessary, all that was demanded, done. The Law fulfilled, our sin atoned for, our debt paid, our victory won.

And what cost Him everything, **cost us nothing.** And necessarily so. For if there was something *we* still have to do, to pay, to supply, to finish, then it was not finished on the cross, and we are still under the Law, and sin, and death. Then Jesus is only our part-Saviour, and we are back to the middle – and that just will not do! No. It is finished. *We have been saved.* For we have a Saviour. A Saviour to whom again this morning we confessed, "*I cannot be your disciple. I cannot do it. It is too much for me.*" And who said back to us: "*Yes, you are quite right. Therefore I forgive you all your sins. What you cannot be, I give to you.*"

You see, that's the key: discipleship isn't something we choose or do, it's a gift. A gift of forgiveness. From Adam and Eve, to Abraham and Moses, to David, to the apostles, to you and me today. *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.* (Rom 3:23-24) For you see, Jesus wants all of you, not just part of you! Not just the Church part, or the weekend part, or the morning devotion part, or the spare time part, or the part of your life that you want to give to Him (but keep part for yourself!) – but all of you, all the time. And so He gave all of Himself, for all of you, that all of you be forgiven. That through His death and resurrection, you be salty salt again. Not re-formed, but

re-created. Made new. Taken back to the beginning, to Eden, just as if all that satan, sin, rebellion, and death stuff never happened at all!

That's how great His love for you. That's how great His death for you. And that's how great your baptism where He gives it all to you. His forgiveness, His life, His salvation. All that you need. Nothing held back. Because the Jesus who wants all of you also gives all of Himself. No partial gifts with Him! No, He is all for you, even also to the eating of His body and the drinking of His blood here at this altar. That the life, strength, and forgiveness you need by multiplied unto you. That you be not "all that you can be" - but all that He is. Being the Christian He has made you by His blood.

So don't try to soften the words of Jesus that we heard today. No, "Oh, they say this but they mean that." No! They are hard words because they are meant to crush you, to kill you! - so that Jesus can *raise* you to a new life. In Him. For only then can you be His disciple.

So how, then, do we live as Christ's disciples? What does all this mean, to live in both extremes; to have it cost us everything, and cost us nothing? Well, perhaps one way to look at it is something like this: **to live by faith toward God as if there was no Law, and to live in love toward our neighbor as if there was no Gospel.** As if, because only the Gospel enables and enlivens us to do this! For in Christ, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. The demands, guilt, and obligations of the Law have been fulfilled and cancelled. By faith we are forgiven and set free. All yours, all gift! And so now we can gift ourselves to others. Which, when you think about it, is really what it means to follow Jesus, who lived, served, and died not because He had to, but because He loved. Who needed nothing and so gave everything.

So too now you and I in Christ Jesus. The Gospel doesn't set us free to do nothing, but to do everything. To live as if there is no tomorrow, because the "today" we live in, in Christ, is never going to end! And that, my friends, is true freedom. And only then, we can follow where He leads. Only then, we can follow . . . even to His cross.

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.