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Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Getting Over Ourselves”

Text: Matthew 9:35-10:20 (Exodus 19:2-8; Romans 5:6-15)

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

You've got to be kidding! I think that had to be one of the first thoughts to race through the minds of the twelve when Jesus told them what He was sending them out to do. Because did you hear that list? *Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.* Sure, they had seen *Jesus* do these things, but . . . *we* can't do that!

Well, they were right. They had to learn what every pastor has to learn and what every Christian has to learn: **to get over yourself.** It wouldn't be them doing these things. For it would not be anything in them that would qualify them or enable them or empower them to be disciples or apostles. Not their learning, their scholarship, their leadership, their charisma, their dashing good looks, or anything else in them. All those things are good and useful, but it is only the power and authority of Christ that would accomplish these things. The very power and authority Christ had given to them. But this they had to learn. To get over themselves, their doubts and fears, and do what had been given them to do . . . and have *Christ* work *through* them.

And so as if to emphasize that point, Jesus continues with a description of how they are to go, and what its going to be like out there. Don't take any supplies, He says. Rely on what you are given. I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. You will be dragged into courts. You will be flogged. It just keeps getting worse and worse! First, a list of impossible tasks to do, and then do them in the midst of an impossible situation. What had they signed up for? Discipleship never seemed so . . . *so deadly.*

Precisely. For if they are to be followers of Jesus, where are they following Him to? The cross. They too must die. They must *get over themselves* (or in other words, die to themselves), so that they live in Christ. In Him and His Word alone. Relying solely

on Him. For it is His work, not theirs. His Word, not theirs. His authority, not theirs. His mission and harvest, not theirs. **And the less of them and the more of Him, the better.** And so Jesus sends the twelve out with nothing, to do what they themselves are unable to do, to teach them. It will be Christ and His Spirit working and speaking through them. They need only go.

Pastors need to learn this as well. To get over ourselves. For we are not in control. The Word and work and power is Christ's. Pastors need simply to do what they are given to do, speak what they are given to speak, and give what they are given to give. God alone grants the growth, gives faith, and changes hearts and lives. No pastor can do these things. For only the Word and power and authority of Christ can use water to cast out demons and raise a person dead in sin to a new life. Only the Word and power and authority of Christ can heal those who are leprous and sick with sin through the word of absolution and forgiveness. Only the Word and power and authority of Christ can make bread and wine the body and blood of Jesus to feed and strengthen us Christians with the faith and forgiveness we need for this life. Only the Word and power and authority of Christ can fill preaching with the power to grab hold of a hell-bent sinner on the road to Sodom and Gomorrah and turn him (or her!) in repentance. Pastors need to learn *I can't do that!* And no amount of learning, scholarship, leadership, charisma, or dashing good looks will be able to change that. Those things are good and useful, but cannot take the place of the power and authority of Christ.

But not just disciples, apostles, and pastors need to learn this – **so do you.** You as the priesthood of the baptized. You have not been given the same task list as the disciples or pastors, but what has been given all Christians to do? It sounds something like this: Love your enemies (Mt 5:44). Pray for and do good to those who hate and persecute you (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27ff). Be perfect (Mt 5:48). Be a *perfect* father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, boss, worker, friend, neighbor, and citizen. To which our response should be: **You've got to be kidding!** *We can't do that!* Or maybe, in our zeal, we answer like the Israelites did at Mt. Sinai: *yes, we will!* . . . and then we don't. Not even close, right? *We hate* our enemies, *forget* to pray, do good mostly to those who can do good back to us, and demand perfection from those around us, even as we fall far from the same standard. And the kicker: that despite all this sin and failure, how often do we have the audacity to look around, filled with pride, and think: *I'm not doing so bad!* Oh, the road to Sodom and Gomorrah is a crowded one indeed.

We too need to get over ourselves. And if pride is to be full of ourselves, then it is repentance that empties us of ourselves. Repentance is the road of discipleship that takes us to the cross and kills us. To confess that we *are* that bad. We are the persecutors, not just the persecuted. We are the wolves who bite and devour one another. We put people on trial in our own courts with laws and standards of our own making, and sit as our own one-man judge and jury. We don't drag people before kings – we take on that role ourselves, with our condemning thoughts and words, assuming the worst about others, and taking delight in our superiority. Yes, Jesus sent the disciples out as sheep among wolves because He sent them to people like us.

But if He sends apostles and pastors to people like us, it is because *He* came for people like us. **He sends them to us to give Himself to us.** For *He* is the Lamb of God who came into the midst of a world of sinful wolves. *He* is the One hauled before Governor Pilate and King Herod. *He* was the One flogged by men and then devoured by death on the cross, that in His resurrection from that death, He defeat all that defeats us. Our sin, our enemy satan, and our death, all swallowed up in His victory. That His life become our life. To make us wolves into sheep and sinners into saints through the resurrecting forgiveness of our sins. To be for us what we could never be for ourselves: a perfect son of God. And then to give that perfection to us. A free, undeserved, gift of grace.

And while some hear this and say: *You've got to be kidding!* this is what St. Paul was talking about in his letter to the Romans. That while we were still weak – or in other words, powerless, unable to do anything for ourselves; while we were still sinners, ungodly and unrighteous; while we were facing a future of death, physically and eternally . . . God sent His Son, who took our place and died for us. Not because we were good people, or righteous folk who needed a little help, or because we had any redeeming qualities in us at all. But simply because of His love. Because He wanted us, and we needed Him. And so Jesus came to undo what Adam did. He came to undo His sin, His death, and His expulsion, so that for us there is *forgiveness* of sin, *life* from death, and a *home* in Heaven.

That is the gift Jesus sends His disciples to give. That is the gift through which the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The healing, cleansing, casting out demons, and raising the dead were not ends in themselves, but signs that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. That the forgiveness of Christ was a full and complete forgiveness and triumph over *all* that effects us in this body and life. Little pictures of, and pointers

to, the resurrection that is ours in Christ.

And so the disciples went, following in the footsteps of Christ. And so we go, following those same footsteps. And you know what? *The disciples did those things they thought they couldn't do.* Because they were not alone. And as we go, it is the same for us. And as you live in Christ and Christ in you, you begin to do those things you thought you couldn't do. Those things Christ has given *you* to do: helping, praying, forgiving, serving, loving. Never completely perfectly in this life (to be sure!), and so also following in the footsteps of your Saviour to His cross, to die and rise with Him. To repent and receive His perfect forgiveness.

So follow those footsteps now again today to this altar, to your Saviour, to eat and drink His body and blood; to live in Him and He in you; to receive the faith, forgiveness, and resurrection you need to live this life you have been given to live.

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.