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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Real Washing”

Text: Mark 7:1-13; Ephesians 5:22-33; Isaiah 29:11-19

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

Jesus does not want *you* to wash - *He* wants to do the washing. And it isn't your hands He is primarily concerned about, but your heart. For it is not those who are neat and clean and respectable on the outside that are of the kingdom of God, but those who are clean on the inside.

And so it was not the good, neat, clean, respectable rich man who died and was taken to heaven, but the poor, dirty, outcast beggar Lazarus. It is not those who act righteous who make the angels in heaven rejoice, but the dirty, rotten sinner who repents. It is not the Pharisees who do all the right things that Jesus praises, but the poor, the lame, the blind, the cripple, the prostitutes, the lepers, the unclean, and the outcasts - those who have no hope in this world; those who all they know to do is fall at Jesus' feet and say, "Lord, have mercy." And He does. For Jesus has not come to be served, but to serve you. (Matt 20:28) He has not come to tell you to wash and clean yourself up and make yourself respectable - He has come to wash you and create in you a clean heart. For He is the only one who can.

The Pharisees that Jesus met in the Holy Gospel today, they didn't get that. Their focus was on what *they* were doing - on their *own* washing and work and the promises they made to God, instead of *God's* washing and work and His promises to them. And to the people, they looked holy. If anyone was pleasing God, they thought, it was the Pharisees!

But what does Jesus say? ***“This people honors me with their lips”*** - with their outward words and deeds - ***“but their hearts are far from me.”*** For Jesus knew, and would later confront the Pharisees with the fact that they rejected God's washing for them. For God sent a washer to them - John the Baptist - who preached repentance and baptized for the forgiveness of sins. And many people listened and were washed, coming to John and acknowledging their sin and receiving the washing of their hearts and the forgiveness of their sins. But not the Pharisees. They would not join the rabble. They would not humble themselves. (Mark 11:30-31) If anyone was going to do the washing around here (they thought), it was them! But they could not. And neither can we. For the washing we need is not on the outside,

but on the inside.

But how often we think like the Pharisees. It is what comes naturally to us in our fallen human nature. We focus on what we do instead of what God does for us. We think that it is my promise to God that matters, not His promises to me. We think that if I can just *do* the right things, then I will be better and more righteous. Thinking that if I can just pick myself up and clean myself off then I will be clean. But it doesn't work. You may wind up looking good on the outside and may even be admired by many and may even be pleased with yourself - but God, who sees the heart, is not impressed. And later, Jesus will even call the Pharisees "whitewashed tombs" (Matt 23:27) - meaning nice and clean and white and nice-looking on the outside, but dead and rotting on the inside.

Whitewashed tombs. Yes, it is who we are, isn't it? And no amount of outward washing, outward dressing, outward good deeds, can change that.

But that's why Jesus has come. To do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. To enter the tombs of hearts and lives filled with sin and death and wash them on the inside. To wash them with the only thing that can wash away that sin and death, and that is His blood. That is what St. Paul told us today. Listen again to his words - slightly modified: ***"Christ loved [you] and gave himself up for [you], that he might sanctify [you], having cleansed [you] by the washing of water and the word, so that he might present [you] to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that [you] might be holy and without blemish."***

Paul wrote those words about the Church, which means they are about you. For he wants you to know that *Jesus loves you* - you who are not very lovable; you whose heart is dead and rotting and filled with the stench of sin. That *Jesus loves you* - and so gave himself up to the death of the cross for *your* benefit; to sanctify you, to make you holy - which is an inner washing, not an outer one. That *Jesus loves you* - and so shed His blood to cleanse your hearts; the cleansing we now receive through water and the word; through Holy Baptism. And that *Jesus loves you* - and so died and rose from death, that you too rise from death and from the death of sin; that he might present you to himself not in shame, but in splendor. Not because you have done it, or done anything, in fact! But because He has. Because on the cross He became what you are - a dead and rotting corpse of sin under the sentence of death, that in His resurrection - His victory over our death - you may be who He is, a clean and holy child of God.

And you are! You are so raised! For you are baptized. Washed with His blood. A dead sinner given a new life.

And you are so raised! For you are absolved - for this morning you did not stand afar off like a Pharisee, but fell at the feet of your Saviour as one who has not lived the new life you have been given, and as a hopeless, helpless sinner said: *"Almighty God, have mercy upon [me], forgive [me my] sin, and lead [me] to everlasting life."* And He did. His forgiveness was given to you. A gift that has no end. The tomb of your heart was washed in His blood. You were cleansed and raised again to new life.

And you are so raised! For you are the disciples who eat a meal which is for cleansing, and which gives not just life, but eternal life. For this meal is the body and blood of the clean one, given and poured into you to cleanse you and feed you and strengthen the new man and the new life given to you.

And so you are clean, not defiled. You are forgiven, not sinful. You are a child of God, not a slave to sin. And you are, for He who is faithful has done it. He whose Word and promise cannot fail has done it. He who has conquered sin and death, has done it. He has done it for you. That you may live. That you may live, even now. For God isn't just washing you for heaven, but that the eternal life He gives you begin now. That the life you live *now* **not** just be like waiting in an elevator until the door opens at the top floor that had the big "H" next to the button, but that you begin to live your new life even now. For His gift of eternal life does not have a "wait until death to open" label on it, but is yours to live now. That in all your callings in life - as a husband or wife, as a boss or worker, as a parent or child, as a student or teacher, as a friend or neighbor - you now live as a new person. A new and cleansed life from new and cleansed hearts. A life of love and faith and forgiveness. The life that Christ lived for you. And this not simply because you are following His example, but because Christ is now living in you. Compelling you, washing you, raising you, and giving you His love and forgiveness, that you may give the same to others.

And in the end, as Isaiah said, *we will see the wonderful work God has done.* For us, in us, and through us. The work of the cross. The work of the cross which though it look bloody and gory and anything but wonderful on the outside, is the wonderful cleansing work of God our Saviour. The cross, which though agonizing is the wonder of wonders that shows the love of God for you. The cross, from which the wonder of His forgiveness continues to flow. The forgiveness of red blood that washes black hearts as white and clean as snow.

So come, you who are defiled by sin. Come, and be washed. Come and be clean.

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.