

11 August 2010
Pentecost 11 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“United in Christ”

Text: Luke 12:49-53; Hebrews 11:17-12:3 (Jeremiah 23:16-29)

The Holy Gospel for tonight sounds rather ominous, does it not? Families divided within themselves. But Jesus is no homewrecker. The Fourth Commandment tells us to *honor, serve and obey, love and cherish* our parents, and Jesus did that, perfectly. Jesus rebukes the Pharisees when, instead of supporting their parents, they invented a way to dedicate their money to God and yet still keep it for themselves (Mark 7:9-13). And Jesus taught us to love our neighbor - and who is a closer neighbor to you than your own family?

Yet there was also a time when some folks came up to Jesus and said: Your family is looking for you. And Jesus replied: *whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother* (Matt 12:50).

And so it seems that there is sense in which the Gospel and faith in Jesus **divides**, but also **unites**. Jesus creates a new reality in which we now live. And that new reality doesn't necessarily peacefully co-exist with the old reality. Even families may be divided.

That's a shock and a disturbing sound bite for those who want to think of God and Jesus as "nice." But we must remember that Jesus didn't come to be nice; He came to be our Saviour. And the battle against sin isn't nice; it's deadly. Jesus didn't come to bring us peace on earth and a nice, easy life; to pat us on the back and tell us: "keep it up! You're doing a-okay." No, He came to show us the seriousness of our sin, how it separates us from God and His life, and kills us - and then to provide us peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins. And so He went to the cross, to be baptized in the fire of God's wrath against sin - the punishment and death that we deserve - that for us instead, we might be baptized in the water of His forgiveness, which extinguishes the guilt of our sin, quenches the fire of hell, and gives us everlasting life.

That new life in Jesus is the new reality in which we now live, and in truth, it will conflict with the old reality of a sinful world. It is a conflict that we feel in ourselves with the battle against sin in our own hearts and lives, and a conflict that we will have with the old wisdom and values and ways of the world, and those that follow them. A conflict that will even reach into, and divide, families. Which is sad. Which God doesn't want. He gave us our families to be blessings to us. And such division,

while it happens, need not be.

Because if the Gospel and faith in Jesus divides, *even more* does it unite. Uniting people from different cultures and languages, different ages and abilities, different times and places. The Word of God has united us to stand side-by-side and shoulder-to-shoulder with each other - husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and neighbors together - saying, *"I am a sinner."* Not one better than the other, or over the other, but all of us receiving the forgiveness of Christ, which raises us from the death of sin to the new life and new reality we have - *together* - in Jesus. For as we are all joined to Jesus in forgiveness, so in Jesus we are all joined to one another in new life. A new family of God.

And so the Son was separated from the Father, forsaken, in the mystery of the cross. The divine family - *in a sense* - divided, so that we might be taken into the family of God through Jesus, through His resurrection life and forgiveness, by grace through faith. This was ***the joy that was set before Him***, as the author of Hebrews wrote. Jesus willingly endured the shame and agony of the cross, because of the joy of having you in His family through His self-sacrifice.

What a wondrous family Jesus has created and made you and I a part of. Not only those gathered in this room tonight, but of those who have gone before us, listed in Hebrews 11: Abel, Enoch, and Noah; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and Rahab; Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel, and countless others. What a ***great cloud of witnesses*** to the life and forgiveness of Jesus. And to His faithfulness. Their lives weren't easy. We heard tonight some of what they endured - troubles, hardships, persecutions, homelessness, death. But though divided from family, friends, and sometimes the world in these ways, they could not be separated from Christ. Not because they were so great, but because Christ is so great. Because He gave them their faith and kept them in that faith. Because He held on to them through thick and thin. His forgiveness and life is greater than all.

And so it is for you - you who are a part of that great cloud of witnesses. Jeremiah warns us not to listen to those who preach a false peace - a peace of the world at the expense of the Word of God. Rather, ***fix your eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of your faith***. The giver of your life, your new life, and your eternal life.

Hostilities and division will come. The key is how we interpret those signs. Jesus said, ***"When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens."*** Hostilities and division will come, and are here. What do they mean? *That the Word of God is working*. Not with the goal of dividing families, but of dividing us from our sin and creating a new family. Of separating us from the world and uniting us to Christ. That won't always be easy,

but it will always be good.

Jeremiah said that ***the Word of the Lord is like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces.*** Thanks be to God when our hard, sinful, stony hearts are smashed, and new hearts of faith given to us. Thanks be to God that He loves us enough to do that for us. And thanks be to God that those divided from us now, our Saviour is even now working to unite them to Himself and raise them to new life too.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.