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Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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"You Are Not Able . . . Yet You Are!"
Text: Luke 14:25-35 (Philmon 1-21)

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

You are not able to be a disciple of Jesus. That's the truth. I'm not going to try to make Jesus' words to you today sound nice, or explain them in a way that will give you hope that if you just try harder, if you just learn more, if you just believe, you can do it. Because you can't. Sorry.

You are not able to be a disciple of Jesus. That's the truth. **The cost is too great for you.** For to be a disciple of Jesus demands not just part of you, or most of you, but all of you, all the time. "You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your mind and with *all* your strength" (Mark 12:30).

And lest we think we can actually love the Lord our God like that, Jesus explains what that means with its opposite: "***If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.***"

Now, the words *love* and *hate* there are not emotions or feelings - which is how we often use them - they are acts of the will. An example of that is in the marriage ceremony, when the bride and groom pledge to love one another by saying, "*I will.*" That's a promise. An act of the will. A commitment. They say to one another "*I will love you from this time forth, no matter what. Even when I don't want to; even when you're unloveable; even when I don't feel like it. I will.*" I will, in this sense, *hate* all others and cling to you alone.

Do you *love* God and *hate* others in this way? Or do you fail to speak the truth to keep peace in your family? Do you bend the rules to get that promotion at work, or to help yourself out at school? Do you avoid doing what you know you should because it's inconvenient or tough? Do you tone down your faith to keep your friends? I know that you *want* to be true to your marriage vows to Christ Jesus, your heavenly bridegroom - I don't doubt that for a moment. But you're a sinner, and you can't. Your sin often gets the better of you.

You are not able to be a disciple of Jesus. That's the truth. **The enemy and his army**

are too strong for you. Not in physical strength, but in temptation, deception, and seduction. Satan cannot force you to sin, but he knows very well how to take advantage of your inclination to sin and your weaknesses, making sin look good and delicious and desirable; convincing you that if you do these things, you will be happy and have what you want. But while he promises the world, he gives you nothing. So why do we keep falling for it? . . . What are those weaknesses in your life? Are you able to win this war? You cannot.

You are not able to be a disciple of Jesus. That's the truth. **For you do not want to bear the cross.** You do not want to lay down your life for others, but want others to lay down their life for you. You do not want your sinful desires to die, but to have them fulfilled. You want to be first, not last. You want glory, not humility. To be recognized and honored and exalted and praised.

I know that all of this is true of you, for all of it is true of me. *You are not able to be a disciple of Jesus.* Neither am I. As sinners, we are unsalty salt, not even of use, Jesus says, for the manure pile. *And if you cannot even improve manure . . .*

You are not able to be a disciple of Jesus. That's the truth. And yet you are a disciple of Jesus! That's also the truth. How can this be? The original Greek can help us here, for Jesus does not use the absolute, strongest form of "no" here. He does not say: you can never, ever, no way, not in a million years, absolutely not, be my disciples. *He doesn't say that.* He says: **you are not able.** And that's true - we are not able, as we have seen.

But there is one who is able. One who did count the cost, who did do battle against Satan and win, who did perfectly love God, who did hate even His own life, who did take up His cross and lay down His life for others. And who in so doing, not only provided for us the forgiveness of our failure and sin, but fulfilled for us what we are unable to do.

And that one, of course, is Jesus.

He came for us, because we could not go to Him. He served us, because we could not serve Him. He loved us, because we could not love Him. **And He died for us, so that we could live with Him.** So that alive in Him through the forgiveness of our sins, we could *begin* to do those things that we could not do before. To be His disciples and follow Him. Which makes being a disciple not something that you do or accomplish or achieve, **but a gift.** A calling to a new life in Christ.

And so it is through the work of Jesus in His death and resurrection that we are made and become His disciples, His followers. For to follow Jesus is not just to be good and do good works, as so many think. For Jesus did not come to be good and

do good works. He *did* those things, but that's not why He came. He came to die. He came to go to the cross. **He came to enter into death with you, and to raise you to life with Him.** That the old, sinful, "not able" man in you die, and that a new, faithful man arise to a new life in Jesus. A new life not only *following* Jesus, but *in* Jesus.

We watched a disciple made like that last Sunday, with little Johnno's baptism. It didn't look like much was happening, but through water and the Word, little Johnno's old, sinful, "not able" man was drowned and crucified with Christ, and He was raised and given the gifts of faith, forgiveness, and a new life in Christ. What he was not able to do and would never be able to do, was done for him and given to him. As it was done and given in the same way to each of us when we were baptized into Jesus. Into His death and into His resurrection.

And so given this new life and called into the life of Christ, you are then given opportunities to live this new life - to bear the cross and lay down your life for others in love and forgiveness, and so follow Christ. And you do not have to look for these opportunities! They will come to you, as the Spirit works in you to conform you to the image of Christ. At school, at work, at home, in your marriage, in your friendships, at church, wherever you are living in the callings you have been given, you have opportunities to love and forgive and serve as Christ has loved and forgiven and served you. Or in other words, to be His disciple.

And you will. You will live the new life in Christ. I have seen it in all of you. But you will also fail. Sometimes *spectacularly*! Because though you have been given a new life in Christ and have begun to follow in His way, your old sinful flesh is still the albatross around your neck, and you will not do what you know you should, and you will do those things you know you shouldn't. Sometimes because you're weak, sometimes because you're stubborn, sometimes because sin is how we often by nature react to things. It will never be easy to follow Christ.

So when you fall, when you fail, don't just resolve to try harder - that doesn't work. Go back to the one who is able. Confess and die to yourself, and hear again His words to you: *I forgive you*. For it is not your efforts and your trying harder that will make you more of a disciple, but Jesus' work in you. Receiving *His* life will make the difference in *your* life.

It won't always be easy - the example we heard today of Onesimus shows us that. Onesimus was a runaway slave who became a Christian after he escaped and got to know St. Paul. His forgiveness and new life in Christ did not give him an excuse for his running away - St. Paul was sending him back to Philemon, his master. And you can be sure Onesimus was plenty scared to go back. Runaway slaves that were caught were not treated nicely. But that was Onesimus' calling right now, and he

was called to love and serve and forgive *there* - not in the place of his own choosing. And so he went back, in faith and trust, that the Lord who gave him his life and now his *new* life, would care for him also now. And he would return and offer a better service than he gave before; for now his service was not of men, but of God. And his returning also gave his master, Philemon, an opportunity to love and forgive - to live in His calling as a Christian, too.

And where you are right now might not be an easy place. But whatever and wherever your callings, your Saviour is using you there in those places - **not because you are able, but because He is**. He is using you to love and serve and forgive, caring for others and providing what they need through you. And in the process, also giving you what you need. For He knows what you need, better than you know what you need. And He has promised to provide.

For your Saviour who has baptized you into Himself and given you a new life, now also puts His Body and Blood into you, a pledge of His forgiveness and life, that He is with you and in you wherever you go. You are never alone. And not just because God is everywhere, but because He is in you. In you with His Spirit and life and all His gifts, to strengthen you and guide you. Not that you "be all that you can be" - that's not enough! But so that you be all that He is. Being the Christian He has made you by His blood.

Jesus words to us today are hard - none of us like being told we are not able to do something. *But they are also comforting* - knowing that you do not have to live up to a certain standard to be here, to be Christ's, to be His disciple. You are here not because you are able, but because He is able. You are here to receive what you do not have. You are here to not to boast, but to confess; to bow the knee and the head and hear the Word of the one who loves you more than all else. Who is delighted there you are here, that He may wash you, feed you, forgive you, cleanse you, strengthen you, uphold you, and bless you.

For you are not able to be His disciple, and yet you are. How wondrous is that?

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.