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Pentecost 11

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Cross is Our Only Theology”  
Text: Matthew 16:21-28 (Romans 12:9-21)

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

**“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”**

Ouch. Poor Peter. He meant well. He really did. He loved his Lord. He had come a long way since that first day by the Sea of Galilee. And yet, with this word of Jesus, he seems back on square one. No, actually, it's worse than that. For while before he might not have known Jesus from Adam, at least he wasn't working against the Lord - he was minding his own business. But now, not only does Jesus call him Satan, an enemy of God, he then says you, Peter, are getting in my way! You are a hindrance to me. You're not thinking right. Your mind is not on the things of God but on the things of man.

Poor Peter. Hadn't he learned anything from being with Jesus?

Now, what did he say that caused such a violent reaction from Jesus? He said: **“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you”** in response to Jesus' statement that **he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.** Peter was thinking: Jesus, as I just said, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. You are the Son of the God who brought His people out of Egypt, who parted the Red Sea for them, who kept them through the wilderness, fed them with manna, gave them water to drink from a rock, and who is mightier than all the armies of the world. You are the Son of the God who created all things and keeps the sun and moon and stars and earth in their courses. You are the Son of the God who feeds all living things, like you fed the over 5,000 in the wilderness not too long ago. There is no one greater than you and your Father in heaven. He won't let this happen to you. He will protect you. He will stop those who oppose you and seek your life.

Peter probably wasn't even thinking of the cross - that was a Roman form of execution. Death at the hands of **the elders and chief priests and scribes** would have been by stoning. But in any case, Jesus dying at the hands of His enemies didn't fit in Peter's mind. It didn't fit what it meant for him that Jesus is *the Christ*,

*the Son of the living God.* And so while it has been revealed to Peter who Jesus is, he does not yet understand how Jesus will be who He is. Peter is still thinking of life and salvation with the mind of man, not the mind of God. And the result here is, really, that Peter is telling Jesus He got it all wrong. Peter is trying to tell Jesus *how* to do His job; *how* to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.

*Which is what we do, too.* We confess with Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And maybe even one better than Peter, we know the story of the cross, of His death and resurrection, and forgiveness and all of that. We got that. . . . Yet when we find out what that means for our life, how often do we think as Peter thought? When pain and suffering come into your life. *No, Lord.* When faithfulness to God's Word means giving up what you want and think you need. *No, Lord.* When we're told, as we heard from St. Paul today, to bless those who persecute you . . . to be patient in tribulation . . . to feed and give drink to your enemy. *No, Lord.* When earthquakes and hurricanes threaten. *No, Lord.* When being a Christian means bearing the cross. *No, Lord.* I'd really rather not, Lord. Some other time, Lord. Somebody else, Lord. No, Lord, I'm your child. Shouldn't I get good things, Lord? Long life, Lord? Blessings and not sadness, Lord? *No, Lord.* No.

*No Lord?* Do you hear yourself? What gives you - little you, insignificant you, miserable, wretched, sinner you - the right to say "no" to God? To anything He sends your way. Jesus is right, isn't He? That's Satan-talk. Satan, who puffs us up to think we're something when we're nothing. Satan, who convinces us we're not so bad and that we actually deserve something from God. Satan, who wants to deny and destroy everything our Lord has come to do. Satan, who wants us to think with the fallen, sinful mind of man, not the mind of God, and thus think wrongly about our Father in heaven. That it is simply not true that everything from Him is good. *Everything.* Even if it seems bad or wrong or upside-down to us. And of this wrong thinking, of our not fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things, we need to repent.

For the truth is that Jesus is not thinking upside-down, we are. Jesus is actually right-side-up, and therefore looks upside-down to upside-down us! And that's why the Christian life, too, looks so foolish and upside-down and backwards to the world, when it's really exactly how things are to be. And so Jesus suffering and dying at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes is exactly how it is to be. **The cross is exactly how Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.** And it must be this way, Jesus says. And Jesus uses a very strong must there - there is no other way. There are no options or alternatives. If you would not have this Jesus - crucified Jesus, suffering and dying Jesus, bloody and rejected Jesus, in the tomb Jesus, weak-looking, humiliated, and shamed Jesus - then you do not have Jesus at all.

For you need this sacrifice for your sin. You need your sin laid on Him on the cross, and His righteousness given to you. You need His blood poured over you in Holy Baptism to cleanse you of your sin. You need His Body as your food and His Blood for your drink. You need to hear Him say *I forgive you all your sin and all this is for you, for you, for you*, over and over again. That you may cling to it. That you may believe it. That you believe it in good times and in bad; in happiness and in sadness; and in bearing *your* cross. Yes, for **Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**

To say, *No Lord*, is, therefore, not to save your life, but to lose it.  
To say, *No Lord*, may gain you the world, but may forfeit your soul.

For the cross is how Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, still today, *for you*. For the purpose of His cross, and the crosses that you bear, are not just His death and resurrection, but your death and resurrection with Him. You’re going to one day die because you’re a sinner. You cannot get around that. But to die *with Christ* is quite a different thing. It means to die a death that ends in resurrection and life. And it is a death and resurrection that is already taking place in you, as you die and rise with Christ in baptism, as you die and rise with Christ in repentance. As you die to your old way of life, your old way of thinking, your Old Man’s “*No, Lord*,” and rise to live a new life, a “*yes, Lord*” life, a right-side-up-in-an-upside-down-world life. There is no other way.

And then, when ***the Son of Man comes with his angels in the glory of his Father, and he repays each person according to what he has done***, you need not fear. Not because of what you have done, but because of what He, Christ, has done. What you have done is sin. What He has done is the cross. The cross **for you**. And for all who are baptized, all who die and rise with Him, all who repent, He will repay you according to what He has done - He will repay your sin with His forgiveness, your death with His life, and your condemnation with His salvation.

And this He is, in fact, already giving to you now. You are among ***those who will not taste death until you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom***. For the Son of Man and His kingdom is coming not just in the future, on the last day - His kingdom is coming already now, and is here, where His Word and Spirit are working, gathering, forgiving, sanctifying, and strengthening. For as the catechism teaches us to understand the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, Thy kingdom come: *How does God’s kingdom come?* God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity (Small Catechism: Explanation of the Second Petition).

And so as our heavenly Father gives His Holy Spirit here in baptism, in the preaching of the Word, in absolution, in His Supper, His kingdom is coming. Coming to you. It is His work, the work of the cross, for you. For the cross is how Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God for you. The cross is everything. Or as Luther put it around the start of the Reformation: *The cross is our only theology.*

Jesus must go to the cross. You must bear your cross. This talk should not surprise us. For it is how your Father in heaven loves you and saves you. Which doesn't make it easy, but does make it good.

So if your life looks upside-down and foolish to the world, good! You have a word to share with them. Of a right-side-up Saviour. Of a cross that saves. Of a life that will never end. And of a kingdom that is ours, even now. So do not fear, do not despair, do not be discouraged. *Set your mind on the things of God, not the things of man.* And rejoice that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, here, today, for you.

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.