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Pentecost 20

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A Treasure Who Cares For You”

Text: Mark 10:17-22; Hebrews 3:12-19; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

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

The book of Hebrews in our Bibles was a letter written to Christians in Rome who were undergoing a frightening persecution and a severe temptation. The persecution came because it was illegal to be a Christian in Rome at that time, and the Christians' claim that their God was the one and only true God didn't sit well with the polytheistic Romans. The Romans didn't like their gods being "dissed" like that, and the Christian *cult*, with the rumors of their weird practices - like killing babies in their rites of initiation (the death and resurrection of Holy Baptism), and cannibalism (the eating of a body and drinking of blood in their meetings) - they saw as a threat to their peaceful and ordered Roman society. So Christians were being killed to try to stop this menace. And, well, if you're going to kill them, might as well enjoy it and make sport of them at the same time, throwing them to the beasts and burning them alive.

So (to understate it a bit) it was tough being a Christian. And so there was a great temptation. Since many (or perhaps most) of the Christians in Rome had formerly been Jews, and the Jewish faith was a tolerated faith in Rome - it was not illegal to be a Jew - the temptation to go back to Judaism was a strong one. There was peace. There was safety. Less fear. Fewer sleepless nights. Seemed like a good deal.

And so the letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage them and to help them understand this one really important fact: *you can't go back*. Oh, physically you could - but the Old Testament had been fulfilled by Christ. He was the great high priest that all the other high priests pointed to. He was the once and for all sacrifice that all the other sacrifices foreshadowed. And so to go back would be, really, going back to a shell whose nut was gone. To go back would be, as we heard today, like the people of Israel going back to Egypt.

That was another time of frightening persecution and severe temptation, remember? God had brought Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, where life had been very, very difficult. But this new life was frightening. There were enemies all around - big, powerful nations who didn't like Israel passing through their lands and who saw them as a threat. There was the hardships of travel through the wilderness - the

difficulty of finding food and water, the snakes and scorpions, the heat and cold, and dragging all your possessions and family along with you. The wonders of the ten plagues and the dividing of the Red Sea were a distant memory, and faced with all this trouble, there was the temptation to go back. Egypt was hard but at least it was safe. At least we had homes and a place to live. Moses and his god have brought us out into this wilderness to kill us, they grumbled. Like the Hebrew Christians in Rome, they wanted rest.

But as they found out, to turn their hearts away from God was not the answer. To turn away from God is not to find rest but to turn away from His rest. It may make you more comfortable for a while, but in the end will leave you back in slavery, back in Egypt, back to that shell with no nut.

And so it was with that rich young man who came up to Jesus one day and asked Him, **“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.”** Jesus lists the commandments in reply to his question - the commandments God had given to His people after He brought them out of Egypt. And to paraphrase them all together, perhaps we could say they are teaching: **do not go back.** Do not go back to doing these things. Do not go back to this old way of life. And the young man replies: *I’m not. I don’t want to go back.* And that’s good. But there’s one more thing, Jesus says. One more thing that’s holding your heart, that you’re afraid to go without, that is tempting you as a false god: *your wealth.* **“Go, sell all that you have . . . and come, follow me.”**

*But that was this young man’s Egypt.* To sell what he had, to do without and be poor, was too much. He could turn away from the other, he could not turn away from this. And so he went back, leaving Jesus. Back to his wealth. *Back to his Egypt.*

Now, let me say, it’s not wrong to be wealthy. The monks of the Middle Ages used this verse as a general directive, saying that all people should do this and become monks! Taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. But that’s not what Jesus is doing here. He is not condemning all wealth. Really, all of us in America, whether you consider yourself wealthy or not, have been blessed with great wealth when compared to much of the rest of the world. *And thanks be to God!* It is He who has given it to you and me.

What Jesus *knew* is that wealth had become this young man’s Egypt. It had become his security. It had become what he could not do without. It had become what he would turn to for assurance, comfort, and rest. Or in other words, it had become his god.

And that’s the challenge for you and me to think about today: namely, **what’s your Egypt?** What is that place you are constantly and perhaps severely tempted to go

back to? Those people or things or thoughts or behaviours or comforts that are so difficult to let go of, that are difficult to turn away from in order to follow Jesus and walk in His ways? For some people it is wealth or stuff or possessions that capture their hearts. For others, maybe it is a sinful behaviour that has such a strong pull and that maybe *you* find yourself turning back to time and again. Sexuality is a big one of those in our day and age. Maybe you have a grudge you're unwilling to let go of, a person you're unwilling to forgive. Perhaps you feel like those Hebrew Christians in Rome, in our world today where holding to Christian truth is seen as bigoted, intolerant, stupid, backward, and perhaps even subversive, and you risk the death of your reputation, or the loss of your job, or the loss of a friend. And so it's easier and safer to turn back to silence instead of to confess; to go along instead of cause waves.

*What is it for you? What is your Egypt? We all have them. If you had been that young person going up to Jesus that day, and asking “**Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” what would be that *one more thing* Jesus would point out to you? And what would you do?*

Now, on the one hand, the young man's question is an interesting one: ***What must I do to inherit eternal life?*** And the answer, really, is *nothing*. An inheritance is a gift. It is something you receive. Something left behind for you by someone after they die. The past few weeks, Laurie and I have both received inquiries for help about inheritances - people looking for the rightful heirs to monies that have been left. There's nothing we can do for those - you're either the person it was left for, or the next in line, or not.

And that is the way of it with Jesus. The gift of eternal life is the inheritance He has left behind *for you*. The book of Hebrews will talk about this in later chapters, that a testament goes into effect when the testator dies. And so through Jesus' death on the cross, His testament has gone into effect. Through His death He has left behind for you the forgiveness of all your sins. Through His resurrection He has left behind for you a resurrection to life after death in His kingdom - a kingdom which has no end. This is the inheritance He has provided for you *by grace* - a gift, that is then received by you *in faith*.

For remember I said that Laurie and I had both been contacted about inheritances the past couple of weeks? Well, one of them didn't work out - I am not the rightful heir to one of them; but the phone call she received we thought was a *scam* - we didn't *believe* it. And so we didn't follow up on it and so will not receive it.

And that's what some think of Jesus and His inheritance - that it's a scam, it isn't real, and they don't believe it. But what Jesus offers in the Word of His Gospel, His forgiveness, life, and salvation, is very real. As real as His cross; as real as His

empty grave. And now through preaching and through His Word and through His Sacraments He holds this inheritance out to you, for you. And through the same preaching, Word, and Sacrament would work in you, through His Spirit, the faith to believe it, and thus receive it. And so from start to finish, the inheritance **is all His work. All gift.**

Satan knows that too. And so what he wants you to do is *renounce your inheritance* - like the Hebrew Christians in Rome who would turn back to Judaism; like Israel in the wilderness who would turn back to Egypt; like the rich young man who turned back to his wealth. He wants you to renounce *your* inheritance by turning back in your doubts and fears to sin. And so he is constantly tempting you to do so; tempting you to go back to your Egypt; tempting you to believe that God's Word and promises are a *scam*, that He will not provide what you need; that you have to turn back and do it yourself. And satan promises: do that, and your life will get *better*.

And again, maybe, *maybe* for a while, if you do, things will be easier. The pressure in your life that's blowing like a tea kettle maybe will find some relief. But don't mistake that for life. As we heard twice from the prophet Amos today: ***seek the Lord and live***. Everything else - *everything else* - in this world *might* be able to improve life, lengthen life, change life, sustain life, or do all kinds of other things to your life. But they cannot *give* life. There is only one Lord and *giver* of life.

He gave you life in Holy Baptism. He sustains that life through His Word and forgiveness. He feeds that life with His very Body and Blood. And so when you need life, when life is difficult and relief far away, *seek Him* [and His life] *where He has promised to be for you*. For Amos and the folks in his day, that would have been the Temple - that was the place where God promised to be for them. For us today, that place is the Word and Sacraments.

To seek Him there by remembering that you are baptized - you are a dear and precious child of God; made so there **by Him**. To seek Him by repenting and receiving His merciful and loving forgiveness, won for you **by Him**. And to seek Him by coming and being strengthened in faith, receiving His Body and Blood, His forgiveness and life - *the New Testament in His Blood* that He left behind for you by His death, and that He now gives to you here in His resurrection.

***Seek the Lord and live***, Amos says. And ***the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you***. He promised. He promised that though He is everywhere, He would be in these very specific places for you, with His grace, His gifts, with exactly what you need.

Amos goes on to say, ***it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be***

*gracious* . . . But for you it is not a "He *may be*" but "He *will*." Amos didn't know whether or not God would spare the nation, but we know what God has done - that He did not, in fact, spare the nation; *He came and saved the world*. And that He has done it changes "He *may be*" to "He *will*." Now that doesn't mean the struggles and temptations will go away - you may need them; they may be sent by Him in love, though they may not feel very loving. But more reliable than your feelings is the truth of your Saviour. If you doubt His love for you, look at the cross. If you doubt His commitment to you, look at the cross. If you doubt whether He is with you, look at the cross. He has *bound* Himself to you in love. Of that you can be sure. *And so turning back to Egypt is not the answer; turning to the cross, turning to your Saviour, is.*

Now, we're never told how this story with the rich young man ended. He went away sorrowful at first, but in the end, *did he or didn't he?* I read a book recently that thought he finally did do this, and that he was telling his story, telling what happened, to all who would hear. That this wasn't just a story Mark remembered and put into his Gospel - this was a now *older* man living and telling his story . . . about how he *thought* he was rich, but only became rich when he sold all he had . . . and then he had treasure in heaven. A treasure that could never be taken away. A treasure, therefore, he didn't have to worry about - but, in fact, **a treasure that worried about him.**

And that's the treasure you have, dear sons and daughters of God. A treasure in heaven that worries about you, that is caring for you, who died for you, and who will not turn away from you but is here for you. That's a true treasure - *your* treasure - for you are His treasure.

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.