

26 June 2016
Pentecost 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Fit and Free”

Text: Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; 1 Kings 19:9b-21

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

“Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

That question might be what earned James and John the nickname “sons of thunder” from Jesus. These wretched Samaritans, who would not receive Jesus as He was passing through their region, deserved to be struck down by lightning. Or so James and John thought.

Their attitude is not unique. In fact, it is quite alive and well in our day and age today. Though not exactly “fire from heaven,” if you happen to be on what someone perceives to be the wrong side of an argument - either political, social, ecological, or economic - you can expect the lightning bolts of their wrath. Businesses are shut down, reputations and finances are ruined, angry protestors and civil activists pop up in an instant, and whatever consequences you suffer will be considered justice for your transgression. Our world today is *filled* with James and Johns, sons of thunder. Vigilantes of justice.

And, perhaps, churches too. For how quick are *we* to breathe fire at those who disagree with us? Or point lightning bolts of condemnation at the latest “really bad sinners?” How eager are we to thunder at the sins of others while at the same time ignoring or burying our own? And how vicious can we be if someone dare expose our sins? And sometimes all it takes is a look of condescension or disapproval, and the point is made: *you’re not one of us*.

That is the flesh talking. Our sinful human nature. That would divide us and them. That would ***bite and devour and consume*** one another. And the ironic thing is: how often that is done in the name of love. We should all love one another, it is proclaimed - unless you disagree with me, unless you’re on the wrong side. And then there is no love for you - only the lightning bolts of wrath.

So how did Jesus respond to James and John’s suggestion and attitude? He ***turned and rebuked*** them. We’re not told how; we’re not told what He said. But I wonder if the rebuke didn’t go something like this:

*Brothers, I have set my face to go to Jerusalem. And there's only one reason I do: to die. The Son of Man must suffer many things and be crucified. And **on that cross** is where the fire of God's wrath against sin is going to come down. The sins of the Samaritans, your sins, the sins of the whole world. There will be a lightning bolt there such as has never been, and never will be again. And it will consume me. But in consuming me, it will save you and all people. My death will be your life. My condemnation will be your acquittal. My forsakenness will be your acceptance. For this I was born and nothing - nothing - is going to stop me. I love you too much not to do this.*

And pardon the pun, but how thunderstruck the sons of thunder would have been to hear words like that. That God doesn't come to us in **great and strong winds, earthquakes, fire**, thunder or lightning - damaging stuff - but in the mercy of a **low whisper** of a man from Galilee. Who spoke not of condemnation from the cross, but of forgiveness, of paradise, and of life. If ever there was anyone who could look at us and say: *you're not one of us*, it was God. And yet our Lord *became* one of us, that we may, in fact, be one with Him. Sons of our heavenly Father and enlivened with His Spirit. That we live no longer by the spirit of this world, but walk by the Spirit of God. The life and Spirit of God given us in the new birth of Holy Baptism, where the old dies and the new lives.

It's hard though, to leave that old way of life. ***I will follow you, but . . .*** We heard some of those "buts" today from those who would follow Jesus. And they sound reasonable, don't they? Even right. Even honorable. *And for you, what is it?* What is your "but?" I will follow you, Jesus, unless it costs too much . . . too much time or reputation or money or effort. As long as I have a place to lay my head. If I can first do *this* or keep *that*. Only if it isn't too inconvenient. As long as it fits my schedule, my goals, the way I want my life to be. And when following Jesus conflicts with your life, who wins? Honestly, sometimes one and sometimes the other, right? But is that good enough? ***Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."***

So you and I are not fit for the kingdom of God. That's the bottom line truth. The sons of thunder aren't either. We've been given a new life but fail to live that new life. We've been given the Spirit but fail to live by the Spirit. If eternal life were based on how well we follow, we have no hope and all is lost.

But here too the words of Jesus give hope. For He who ***set His face to go to Jerusalem*** has now set His face toward you. And as resolute as He was to go to the cross to win your forgiveness is just as resolute as He is to come here for you today with that forgiveness. To give life to the dead. To raise you who have fallen. To fulfill where you have failed. And so as you confessed this morning that you are not fit for the kingdom of God, Jesus - whose face never looked back, but only to His Father and to you - said to you: *I forgive you and make you fit, with my fitness and life*. I, your pastor, spoke those words to you this morning, but Jesus was the One who gave them, filled them, fulfilled them, and did

them. So in Him **you are fit and you are free.**

But now just as your physical fitness depends on diet and exercise, so does your spiritual fitness. That's what Paul was talking about in the Epistle we heard today. You are, he is saying, in essence, fit and free. So do not let it go. ***Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*** - slavery to sin, to obey it and its desires.

So you are fit and free. So do not now ***bite and devour one another*** and ***consume one another***. Devouring your neighbor's reputation and getting a pound of his flesh is not a healthy spiritual diet! Do not gratify that sinful craving. Rather, come here and **bite and devour the flesh and blood of Jesus** that He gives here for you. For this is the diet that gives you spiritual health and strength in the life and forgiveness of Jesus. And if you are what you eat, then by this meal you grow into the likeness of Christ.

And as far as exercise, as far as life, Christ did not make you fit and free for ***sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these***. And just as sitting on the couch and eating junk food is tempting, so are these. And the devil knows it, which is why he is always trying to lure us into these things with ways ever new and inventive. To rob you of the life and fitness of Christ, that has been given to you.

So, Paul says, none of that. Rather, put into practice what the Spirit is working in you: ***love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control***. For that is the life of Christ living in you. In you is not the thunder of judgment and sin, but Christ and His mercy and love, given to you, living in you, and working through you. Doing these things doesn't make you fit - one made fit does these things. For you cannot make yourself fit for the kingdom of God, one is made fit by Christ, with His fitness; His gift to you. And this is simple what that fitness, the fitness of Christ Jesus, looks like - this list of fruits that Paul gave. And if it's not what your life looks like - and honestly, none of our lives do; at least, not enough - the answer is not for you to just try harder, but to receive more Christ. To repent - or as Paul puts it: ***to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires*** - and receive the forgiveness, life, and fitness of Christ. To devour His forgiveness, His Word, and His Body and Blood. That these work in you and make you not sons of thunder, but sons of God.

“Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

Thank goodness the answer is no. And that instead, Jesus has come down from heaven to save them. And you. That you not be incinerated by the fire of His wrath but purified by the fire of His love.

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.