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Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“What Do You Want to Hear?”

Text: Matthew 10:34-42; Jeremiah 28:5-9; Romans 7:1-13

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

Sometimes people just tell you what you want to hear. It could be because they just don't care. Sometimes they're being condescending. Or maybe they want something from you, and think they'll get it by telling you what they think you want to hear. And if you know that, if you know that's what they're doing, it makes you angry. It's belittling. It means you really don't matter; they're the only ones that matter. You're just being used, abused, ignored, or pushed aside.

Sometimes politicians do that in order to get votes. Not all and not always, but it happens. The last election cycle was interesting because it was noted that people who were answering polls were telling the pollsters what they thought they wanted to hear instead of what they really thought. And so some of the polls were very wrong.

But it's not just politics. Sometimes children do it to their parents, spouses to each other, friends, too. Just say what they want to hear . . . It can even get absurd. Like when we tell the doctor that everything's fine when it's really not. Maybe we do that because it's what we want to hear; what we want to believe. We don't want to deal with the truth.

Today we hear the truth from Jesus. We always get the truth from Jesus, but today it is a truth that we perhaps would rather not hear; that we would rather not believe; that we would rather not deal with. That the Christian life is not all candy and roses. In fact, the truth is that following Christ and His Word may put us at odds with the world, divide families, and even lead to you losing your own life. Clearly, Jesus is not fishing for votes here.

This is what the prophet Jeremiah also was dealing with in his day - some 600 years before Jesus came. And he was not the first. But at that time, there were other prophets - one we heard about today was named Hananiah - who were not speaking the truth, but were just telling the people what they wanted to hear. And in Hananiah's case, he was telling the people of Judah that everything was okay, they were okay, God was not unhappy with them, and in fact, was about to restore them and their kingdom and all that had been taken from them. And the people liked hearing that. They didn't have to repent or change; they were all good.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, was speaking something quite different. That the people were not okay - they were being unfaithful to the Lord; that God was not okay or happy with that; and that there was not restoration coming, but another military defeat and the people being hauled off as prisoners of war.

Of course, the people wanted to believe Hananiah. They liked his message better. But, Jeremiah said, *which is the truth?* The true prophet is not one who says what the people want to hear, but the one who speaks the truth. And not many years later, it was Jeremiah's word that came true. The nation was defeated in battle, the people taken as prisoners, and they lived as exiles for 70 years.

The Christian life is not easy because the truth of God's Word goes against our very nature and what we want to be true. For the truth is, we, too, like the message of Hananiah more than the message of Jeremiah. We like those who tell us we're okay just the way we are, that we don't have to change, that God likes us and will bless us and protect us because we're pretty good people, try hard, and do our best.

But that's not only not what Jeremiah said, it's also not what Jesus said today. For who of us lives up to His standard? Who of us is worthy of Him? Remember what He said? ***Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*** If Jesus were living today, those stunning words would have been caught on someone's cell phone video, played over and over again on the news, and His Messianic career would be over. Not what we want to hear, Jesus. Not what we want to hear.

Well, not just today. Then, too. Words like this from Jesus are what got Him put up on the cross. He didn't try to say what people wanted to hear. He didn't try to save His life, so He lost it. Brutally.

**But because He did, there is life for us.** Because He spoke the truth, we know the truth, unpleasant as it may be: that we're not worthy of Him or eternal life. We do love others more than Him. We love our stuff more than Him. We love ourselves more than Him. And we try to save and hang onto what we love the most - our lives and reputations and activities and stuff, more than Christ and His truth. You can see it when we say things like: I know I shouldn't say this, but . . . I know I shouldn't do this, but . . . I know this is wrong, but . . . *We're. Not. Worthy.*

This is also what Paul was explaining to the people in Rome. This is the reason God gave the Law. ***That sin might be shown to be sin*** - in us! - ***and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. Sinful beyond measure.*** That we be shown to be not just a *little* sinful, but thoroughly sinful. Sinful through and through. Not one part

good and one part bad. Sin-full. Sin-filled. Un-worthy. Of life or anything else from God. That may not be what we want to hear, but that is step one in receiving life from Jesus - knowing the truth about ourselves.

**But unworthy does not mean unredeemable.** Jeremiah spoke the truth and Jesus spoke the truth so that we would not only know the truth about ourselves, but **so that we would know the truth about Him.** That we would not look to ourselves for our hope, but look to Him. That we know the only way to worthiness is through Him. And specifically, His cross.

For, the apostle Paul said today, you are unworthy because you are obligated to fulfill God's Law - all of it, perfectly, through and through - *and you don't*. And so you deserve death and eternal dying. And the only way to be set free from that obligation is to die. Because once you die, the Law doesn't have any control over you anymore. Paul uses the example of marriage - that once your spouse dies, you are free to marry again; you're set free from the laws of marriage; they don't apply anymore.

So . . . notice what's being said there. If we do not fulfill the Law perfectly we're going to die, but the only way to be free from the obligation to keep the Law is to die, so we're going to die either way. So why bother? Just do whatever you want. Don't worry about right and wrong. Because it doesn't matter if we're all going to die anyway. And some people do live like that.

*But what if there was a way to life? A way to die and be free from the obligation of fulfilling all the Law, and then live in that freedom from the Law? Wouldn't that be something? Wouldn't that be something worth knowing and living? So that we don't just live for a while and then die, but now also die *and then live*?*

So Jesus said that's what He came to do. Not just die on the cross, but die and then live. So that we can die and then live.

Or think of it this way: a knife in the hands of a criminal is a weapon of death. But a knife in the hands of a skilled doctor is transformed; it becomes an instrument of life. That is what Jesus did with the cross. For the cross wielded by Rome was a weapon of torture and death. But the cross with Jesus on it is transformed into an instrument of life. For on the cross Jesus gives His life to death, into order to take His life from death again. And in taking His life back again in His resurrection, provide that same life from death for you, too.

So on the cross Jesus becomes the unworthy one, Jesus becomes the sinner, Jesus takes the sword and division and loses His life. He takes all that your peace-shattering sin can throw at Him, and He dies for it. But because it was all thrown against Him, it is not thrown against you. Which is what He wanted. So that when He rises from the dead with

new life, there is now nothing to throw against you. He already took it all. All those threats and stones and arrows of the Law Satan was ready to hurl against you . . . *are gone*. He used them up on Jesus. So that you can have peace. Peace now, and peace forever. A new life now, a new way to live, a new hope and freedom.

And you get that now when you die and rise with Jesus now. That's baptism. For in those waters you don't do anything; but in those waters Jesus makes your sins His and His forgiveness yours; your death His and His life yours; your unworthiness His and His worthiness yours. That you come out of those waters a new person, with a new life, a new way to live, a new hope and freedom.

And that's what happened to you. And it's what continues to happen to you also when you repent and receive absolution; when you repent and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus; when you read and hear the Word and promises of God in His Word and cling to them by faith. Life happens. You get the righteous one's reward. You get the prophet's reward. New life. Gift life. Bonus life. Life from the dead. And you're no longer living to die, but dying to live.

So while Jesus doesn't tell us what we wanted to hear, He tells us what we need to hear, and it turns out that that's what we really wanted to hear all along - *we just didn't know it*. He doesn't tell us we're okay, He tells us we're forgiven. He doesn't tell us we're good, He tells us that He has goodness for us. He doesn't tell us how to overcome sin and death, He tells us that He did it for us. So that we can now live. A new life. A new way to live. Not for ourselves, but for others. He lived for us, to set us free to live for others. A freedom even greater than our country celebrates this weekend.

So in Jesus, what we want and what we need is what we have. And if you disagree with that statement, think again . . . about what you really want and what you really do need. And that - just maybe - that really is what you hear and receive here. In Jesus.

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.