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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“An Offensive Confession”

Text: Matthew 16:13-20 (Romans 11:33-12:8; Isaiah 51:1-6)

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

Hurricane Harvey hit Texas yesterday. It went from a “I think I see some kind of storm in the Gulf of Mexico” to a category four hurricane in just a few days. And when the track of this storm pointed toward Texas, the people started to prepare; to play defense, if you will, against the attack of this storm. The people got supplies, protected their homes and businesses as best they could, and then many got out of town, knowing that even our best defense provided little hope against such a powerful storm.

But what if instead of just defense, we could go on offense? What if there was a way, when a storm like this forms, instead of waiting for it to attack us, we could attack it? And weaken it or even defeat it before it gets to us? That would be pretty awesome.

Now what about the Church? The Church has a long history, of course, in the Old Testament and now also in New Testament times. But at least these days, it seems to me at least, that the Church mostly plays defense. Storms like the storms of secularism and unbelief swirl about in our culture and get stronger, and the Church seems to be like Texas. We hunker down and prepare for the onslaught. We focus on survival.

But what if instead of just defense, we go on offense?

That is, in fact, what we heard today from the lips of Jesus. When Peter confessed Jesus to be *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, Jesus responded: *on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*. Take notice of that. Jesus did not say: the gates of the Church shall prevail, but the gates of hell shall not prevail. The gates of hell will not be able to stand against Christ and the confession of Him as the Son of God and Saviour of the world.

You see, back in those days cities - like Jerusalem - were built with walls around them to protect them, and in the walls were gates to allow the people of the city to come and go. If you were to attack the city, the walls were difficult to breach and more easily defended. On the top of the wall you had the high ground and could shoot down or throw rocks down on the people trying to get up and in. But if you could get through the gates, and your army could stream in *en masse* through that opening, the city was yours.

So when Jesus says here that *the gates of hell shall not prevail against* Him and the confession of Him as Son of God and Saviour of the world, that's an offensive statement. That Christ and His Word are the battering ram against which the gates of hell - and so hell itself - is not able to stand.

And that's exactly what we see in Jesus. He is sent into this world, into the battle. And He attacks. He heals diseases, demons flee, and when the storm of opposition strengthens and blasts against Him, putting Him on the cross, even there He emerges victorious, rising from the dead and leaving His enemies stuttering and regrouping, trying to figure out and explain how that so heavily guarded and sealed tomb could now be empty.

But even more than that - not more important than that, but in addition to that - is that phrase we speak in the Apostles' Creed about what Jesus did: that He *descended into hell*. And that not to suffer or be under the thumb of satan for a while. Because when Jesus said on the cross *it is finished* (John 19:30), it was. And so Jesus descended into hell not to suffer, but to attack and fulfill this promise - to defeat the gates of hell itself. Jesus is all about offense.

And so now apply that to the Collect for the Day which we prayed today earlier: *Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life . . .* When you know God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; when you know Him as your Father and you His child because you've been baptized into His Son, Jesus, and therefore you are also a son of God; when you know Jesus' victory has been given to you in those waters by the Holy Spirit who gives you such faith to know and believe - you have everlasting life. A life that will last forever and cannot end. And so you can go on the offensive. Imagine a soldier who knew that: that He could go into war, He could go into battle, and not die! He (or she!) couldn't be stopped.

*That's you.* Baptized into Jesus, into His death and resurrection, into His victory, into Him who is the way, the truth, and the life, *that's you.* To be bold and steadfast. To *boldly confess Him to be the Christ* and *steadfastly walk in [His] way.* Because in Christ, you have a life that cannot end.

And so then Jesus sends His disciples out to go on the offensive, too. To wield the sword of the Spirit, the sword of God's Word. In the reading from Matthew that we heard today, Jesus at that time *strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.* Because He had to be the Christ, He had to go through His death and resurrection, before they could go out and proclaim Him as Christ. But once He does, He tells them to go out and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). To go on the offensive. To go out and fight with His Word. To attack. And the gates of hell would not prevail. Even when the storms of martyrdom and persecution swirled up to category five strength, they couldn't be stopped. Yes, they, and many after them, were killed, but they live on in that life that

cannot end. In the victory of Christ.

But what about today? Why are we today so often, it seems, on defense instead of offense? Well, there really can be only one answer: *our own unbelief*. The things of this world seem stronger. Death seems so final. The Word of God and the confession of Christ seem so weak. And we want to be liked. Maybe we don't go on the offensive because we don't want to be offensive, and so we just wind up being defensive. And maybe we're just afraid of what will happen. And maybe we think all that because, well, quite frankly, things seem to be different today. All that stuff that happened at the time of Jesus and the disciples doesn't happen today.

*But how do you know that?* Just because you haven't witnessed it? Or maybe it's not as fast or spectacular as you want it to be? Maybe we just don't have the eyes to see what God is doing and how He is working . . .

But the promise made to Peter and the other disciples is just as true for us today. And His victory is just as true and sure for us today. And the weapon they wielded is the same weapon we have, and just as powerful.

Truth is, we *don't* know what God is doing. Paul said as much today: ***Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"*** God doesn't need us to tell Him what is good or not, or to tell Him what He should be doing. If we *were* God's counselors, we would have told Him *not* to send His Son, and we would have been like we're going to hear Peter say next week, that Jesus should *not* to go to the cross! But God knew what He was doing. He knew how to fight, and He knew how to win. And He did.

And even though we may not see it, and even though it may not seem it, He still is. The gates of hell still cannot prevail against the Church built on Christ and built by Christ and on the confession of Him. If it depended on us, we *should* doubt and we *should* be afraid. But it doesn't. It's all on Him.

And so we go with Him and He with us, offensively, into this world. We baptize, and demons flee. We pray, and our Father hears us and answers us. We speak, and the Spirit works and attacks through that Word. We forgive, and the chains of sin and guilt satan would imprison us with really are loosed. And we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus, to attack that old sinner in us and put him (or her) down; and that we be what we eat. To be transformed into the image of Christ, to give ourselves - on offense - for others, as Christ gave Himself - on offense - for us. Bold and confident that we cannot out-give God, and that the life He has given us cannot end.

So go out, speak up, attack the storms of secularism and unbelief, and do not be afraid.

Make your bold confession along with Peter. ***Who do you say I am? You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*** The crucified and risen one. The victorious one. Who fights not with the weapons of this world, because as Isaiah said, this world is passing away. So He fights with weapons even stronger - with forgiveness and truth and life. And what He opens no one can close. What He looses no one can bind. What He gives no one can take away.

So while lots of people say lots of things about Jesus, the gates of hell fear only one: ***you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*** And ***blessed are you*** - both now and forever - who know and confess that truth.

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.