

8 July 2018
Pentecost 7
Confirmation of Susan Marcelli

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“An Astonishing, Giving God”

Text: Mark 6:1-13; Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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

Jesus went home. Traveling about the towns and villages of Galilee, it was inevitable that He would come to His hometown, too. But maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe the friendships from His youth and the memories of His neighbors made Him want to go back.

So Jesus goes home. And as usual, He goes to Church on the Sabbath. And also, as usual, He is given the opportunity to teach. Those who heard Him were *astonished*, at first. No one ever said the things He said. No one ever taught the way He did. But then, upon further review, upon reflection, their astonishment turned into *offense*. Actually, the Greek word used there is stronger than that - they were *scandalized* by Him.

So, what did He say? What offended so? What caused such scandal? Did Jesus use the wrong pronoun for some people? Were the words He used heard as micro-aggressions - words that shamed or disrespected some of the people who were there? Was He not being politically correct? Perhaps a new hashtag began trending in Galilee that day: **#notJesus**.

So what was it? Well, it seems that His teaching that day was the same as so many other times He taught in synagogues. He took the assigned passage that was read from the Old Testament that day and applied it to Himself, teaching that the Old Testament Scriptures were fulfilled in Him. That they all talked about Him. That they all pointed to Him. And so the people, at first astonished, then begin to say: *Wait a second! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?* We know Him. He's nothing special. We don't know where He got this wisdom or power, but He can't be who He says He is! He's one of us! He can't put himself over us! **#notJesus**

Well, in a way, they were right. Jesus had not come to put Himself over them. The Son of God had not come down from heaven to put Himself over them. He already was! The reason He came down from heaven - in fulfillment of the Scriptures - **was to put Himself under them**. To serve them. To lift them up. To give to them. To help them. To lay down His life for them. And so by rejecting Him, and rejecting all that, the people of Jesus' hometown robbed themselves - of His service, of the good He came to bring. For Mark tells us that **He**

could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. Only a few believed. So sadly, only a few received His gifts.

And now it was Jesus' turn to be astonished. *He marveled because of their unbelief.*

Then the disciples, who witnessed all this, are sent out by Him. Jesus gives them His gifts to give, but they will be rejected, too. Not all will receive them or receive the gifts, the service, the help, the life Jesus has come to bring, and gave His disciples to give.

But this is not new. They rejected Ezekiel too. And many of the prophets before him. For as we heard in the Old Testament reading, God told Ezekiel, *I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. . . . The descendants also are impudent and stubborn . . .* The descendants that lived at the time of Ezekiel. The descendants that lived that day in Galilee. And the descendants that still are around today. For even today, Jesus is a cause of offense, scandal, and rejection.

So really, the amazing thing is that Jesus is there, is here, at all. *That God is still trying!* Still causing His Word to be preached, still giving His gifts, still caring and providing for people - even those who do not believe in Him. If it were us . . . we, I'm sure, would have given up a long time ago! Our patience and forgiveness can only take so much. But God continues to love.

So what is it today? What is it today that causes some to be offended, scandalized, at the God who only wants to come and give His gifts?

Well, there's many reasons, I'm sure. But perhaps one reason is our belief in equality - that everyone should be treated equally. And perhaps at some times and in some ways that is important and true. But not always. Because love doesn't treat everyone the same. Love takes into account who a person is and what a person needs and acts accordingly. Parents know this. You don't treat your children all the same because they're not all the same. They have different needs, have different personalities, respond in different ways. And since you love them, you act accordingly.

Now, the children may not understand that! *That's not fair!* is the cry every parent has heard. And that's right. It's not fair, equal. *It's love.*

Well so, too, with God. Take, for example, what we heard in the Epistle today. One man, Paul tells us, was *caught up to the third heaven* (whatever that means); given a glimpse of paradise. But what did Paul get? Did he get caught up? Did he get such a vision? No. *A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me,* Paul says. *Not fair!* right? But it's what Paul needed. And it's what that man needed. So it wasn't fair, but it was good. *It was love.*

So what has God given you? What has God not given to you? Are you offended, scandalized, mad? Or could this be good? Just in ways that you, as a *child* of God, do not yet know or understand? A reason to marvel and give thanks to God for His love.

Or maybe today the offense is the scandal of particularity - that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. That all religions are not the same, not all just different paths up the same mountain. Because what the Scriptures tell us is that while all the others are trying to climb up to God, some way, some how . . . the Son of God came down to us. To serve us. To help us. To give to us. To lift us up. No other God died for you. No other God laid in the tomb for you. No other God rose from the dead for you. Only one. Only Jesus. And for this we should not be offended, scandalized, but marvel and give thanks for such love . . . for the God who comes to us, and gives and gives and gives.

But maybe we - we here today - have even more cause to marvel and be astonished. We who are baptized. We who are here every, or nearly every, week. We who have received the Lord's gifts, and yet . . . continue to sin. Fail to pray. Rebel against our parents. Neglect His Word. Live during the week as if nothing had happened here. Who fear, love, and trust lots of things each week more than God. I wonder if Ezekiel could tell us apart from the people he was sent to way back then? We like to think we're different . . . but are we?

And yet every week, our Lord comes home, here, with His gifts. Every week, Jesus comes home, here, to His house, and teaches us. He has fulfilled all the Scriptures. He has provided all that we need. And He serves us. He calls us to repentance, yes, which is never pleasant, but it's in love; so that we will know our need. Not so that we be offended, but so that we joyfully receive His gifts in faith. For if He didn't give them, we *wouldn't* have them. If He didn't give them, we *couldn't* have them.

That's what Susan - who is being confirmed today - has learned as she learned the catechism. She learned who she is, and she learned who God is. She learned that she is unable to keep the Law, but that Jesus came and fulfilled it for her. She learned that Jesus served her by taking all her sin and unrighteousness and death, and gave her His forgiveness, perfection, and life. She learned that there is nothing in her that made Jesus do this for her, it is all His love - for her and for all people. And she learned of the gifts that are here for her - the gifts that God will never stop giving - the life and promises of her baptism, the renewing absolution spoken upon her, the Word of His Gospel, and the very Body and Blood that redeemed her, given her to eat and to drink, that she be strengthened with His life and forgiveness. And while it is humbling to have your self-esteem crushed as you hear the Law and see your sin and death, it is pure joy to then hear and receive the forgiveness and life of Jesus, and His love for us that will never end.

And so like Joanna last week, Susan is going to confess her faith in this astonishing, gracious, giving, loving, serving God. The God who came to her in her baptism, and is still coming to her here. And won't stop. Though there may be times when she is stubborn and

rebellious. Though there may be times when she prays for God to remove a few thorns from her life, but He does not. Though there may be times when she questions God and how He is working and serving and loving. Though there may be times she takes her Lord for granted. As she joins us at the Lord's Table today, she joins us in all that, too. Because all of us who come to the Lord's Table today do those things, for we are needy, fallen, stubborn, rebellious, questioning, weak sinners. Today, Susan says: *that's me*. And today her Saviour says: *it's me*. I forgive you. Take, eat, and drink.

And we who hear that should marvel - and rejoice! - at our God, at such gifts. For us.

The hymn we're going to sing at the end of the service today describes this well. I chose it for today because it is Conference Hymn for the conference the youth and I will be at this week, and I wanted to share it with all of you. I don't think we've ever sung it before, and at first blush, it might not seem to fit with the readings for today. But it really does. Because it describes well our astonishing, giving God, who comes to us living *In the Shattered Bliss of Eden* (LSB #572), to supply our need, give us hope, forgive our sins, restore our life, and not just restore Eden, but even better - to prepare a new paradise for us, and prepare us for it.

That's what Jesus wanted for the folks in His hometown. And while they, at first, were offended by Him, scandalized by Him, and rejected Him, perhaps they, like Jesus' family, later believed. And so we pray for all people, and for ourselves. That our Lord would bring all to faith in Him, and keep us strong in this faith - in our gracious, loving, giving God. That He continue to call us to repentance. That He not be fair but loving. And that He come to this house, today, and grace us with His amazing gifts. So that when we go home, when Jesus calls us home, either through death or when He comes again, He who was not welcomed in His hometown will welcome us to His.

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.