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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Tree to Feed Life”

Text: John 6:35-51 (1 Kings 19:1-8; Ephesians 4:17-5:2)

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

In the beginning, when there was no death, there was a tree of life.

Isn't that interesting? Why did they need such a tree? What did it do? What did it give that none of the other trees could give? Well, we cannot speculate too much here, beyond what the Word of God tells us. And all the Word tells us is its name. It was a tree of life. A tree with life in it. A tree that fed life. Gave life.

All the others trees - except for one - could feed Adam and Eve and the children they would have. But these were not trees of life. Trees with life in them. Trees that give life. There was only one tree that could do that. Only one.

That's sounds a bit funny though, doesn't it? Because we know we must eat to live. And that *how* we eat will, in a large way, dictate how we live. We know so much more now about food and nutrition than we've ever known before. What foods are necessary and which are better not eaten. There are all kinds of different diets and plans. Some, I'm sure, are healthier than others. Some, I'm sure, make you feel better than others. I'm not criticizing any of them. People who discover one of these diets and is helped by it and sticks to it, I admire them. I am not so good. I am not so strong.

But here's the thing: no matter what you eat or how you eat, no matter what your diet, even if you have the perfect diet and perfectly stick to it, this too is true: you're going to die. Like all the other trees in the Garden for Adam and Eve, these trees, these diets, these foods, cannot give us life. They sustain it for a while, maybe keep you going longer or better, nourish us. But in the end, they will fail. All of them. You, me, your spouse, your parents, your children, your friends, we're going to die.

That's what happened to the people of Israel in the wilderness, after God brought them out of their slavery, out of Egypt. They needed food, and God gave them manna to eat. Bread from heaven. It was wonderful. It was miraculous. And it sustained them for a while. A long while. 40 years. But it was not bread of life. They died in the wilderness. A whole generation.

Yet that was the kind of bread the people of Jesus' day were looking for. Jesus' miracle reminded them of those days, the good ol' days. Bread from heaven. Jesus had made a good start. He had fed over 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two fish. It was wonderful. It was miraculous. And so they came for more. Don't stop now, Jesus! Keep it up. Keep it up and you'll be just like Moses. Maybe even greater. Don't stop now, Jesus! Do it again, and then do it again, and again. That's what we want, Jesus.

But Jesus knew. That's not bread that can give life. Even Elijah's bread, that we heard about in the Old Testament reading - a cake of bread and a jar of water brought by an angel . . . It was wonderful. It was miraculous. It kept him alive and going for forty days and forty nights! But it was not bread of life, life-giving bread, bread with life in it. Had Elijah not been taken in a whirlwind to heaven, he too would have died - as he wished. Just like all the other prophets.

Because instead of eating from the tree of life, the tree with life in it, the tree that gave life, Adam and Eve decided instead to eat of that other tree - the one with death in it. And that brought about this other interesting reality:

**That in the beginning, when there was no death, there was a tree of life.
Then, when there was death, there was no longer a tree of life.**

God barred Adam and Eve and their children from the tree of life. The tree given to nourish the living could no longer be eaten, for now they were dying.

But we hunger and thirst for life. Dying is not right, and we know it. Dying is not natural, not normal, no matter how much some in the world try to convince us that it is. So we hunger and thirst for life. And we chase after it. But we've been dying for so long, do we even know what it is that we're chasing? Maybe that's why it's so hard to find!

For think, for a moment: what are you chasing? What are you going after? That's where we think we'll find the life we need. Maybe it's education, accomplishment, success. Maybe it's power, popularity, or riches. Maybe it's all our desires fulfilled, though some think it's all our desires denied. Maybe it's having a purpose in this world, value, meaning. What is it for you? What are you chasing? But people who have done those things, achieved those things, where are they now?

So maybe, just maybe, Jesus is saying today, there is a better way. Maybe it's not what we're chasing at all, but God chasing after us.

That's what happened in the beginning. When Adam and Eve began dying, they hid. They couldn't go to God. But God came to them. Chased after them. Dragged them out of their hiding places and gave them the promise of a Saviour. One who would restore the life they had tossed aside. They were dying and so could no longer eat of the tree of life,

but now they began to live again. Because, as we heard Jesus say today: *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes* - believes the Word and promises of God - *has eternal life*.

And that's what was happening throughout the Old Testament. God chasing after the dying, to give them life. Chasing them through His prophets to drag them away from whatever they thought was giving them life, that they find their life in Him.

Now it was happening in Galilee, in Judea, in Capernaum. Jesus is the Son of God who came down from heaven, to chase after and drag people out of sin, out of death, out of our poor substitutes for the life He has come to give, and restore us to true life. That we see in Jesus the one promised to Adam and Eve. That we see in Jesus what we're hungering and thirsting for. That we see in Jesus life, and live. *For*, as Jesus said, *this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him* - believes what God has said about Him; believes the Word and promises of God in Him - *should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*.

And so there is life again. Life that death can no longer end. In Jesus.

For the one with only life in Him dies, so that we who have only death in us may live.

Or we can say it this way, too:

The one with no sin becomes the sinner and takes our place in death; so that we with only sin may be sons of God, and take His place in life.

The people who heard Jesus grumbled at that. We know where you came from, where you grew up, who your parents are. You're not who you say you are. Surely we can have life without you, apart from you. People grumble that today as well. Maybe you have, too.

But those who ate the manna died. And those who eat all the breads of this world - that are all also from God's hand, by the way - will die. There's only one who can raise you to life again. The one who died for you, but who Himself rose from death and the grave and left it behind, a defeated foe.

And this resurrection to life Jesus has promised you. In the words of your baptism. In the words that we heard today, His words of promise. *And He will not cast you out*. He wants only to save and give life. To save us from ourselves and our sin and our sinful desires and chasing after all that cannot give us life, and give us Himself and His forgiveness and His life. True life. Life that will last forever.

And so now, for us who have been set free from death by grace through faith in the promises of God in Christ Jesus, for us who have been raised to life again in Christ Jesus,

baptized into His death and resurrection, in Christ Jesus there is again a tree of life. Jesus has restored us. And so new food for the new Adam in us. But not the same food. Now, the Body and Blood of Jesus. The Bread of Life.

Why do we need such food? What else do we need when we're saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus? Well, what did Adam and Eve need with such a tree when there was as yet no death in the world? But God put it there for them. A tree of life. A tree with life in it. A tree that fed life.

And so too for us, though we know a little more about this food. The Body and Blood of Jesus is food for our journey. We've been saved by Jesus, and He puts here food for this life. Food with life in it. Food that feeds the life He has given us with His forgiveness, His life, and His salvation. That we may be His own and live this new life He has given us. This new life, no longer for sin but for Him. This new life that St. Paul described today in the Epistle, as *imitators of God, as beloved children. . . . Walking in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* And so forgiving one another, doing good for all, and chasing after not the things of this world, but rejoicing in the God who has chased us down and given us life.

And finally, if you're not convinced, think about this too: that in Revelation 22, the very last book of the Bible, the very last chapter in the Bible, where we are given a picture of Paradise and eternal life, you know what's there? Yeah, *the tree of life*. Why do we need the tree of life when we have eternal life? When we're *there*? When there is no more death?

Well, perhaps this is the way we should think: because life is never ours, our possession. It is always the gift of God, for however long He gives it to us. Even in heaven. So this is what eternal life means: The promise that He will give us this life, His life, eternally. Forever. That we will never be barred from the tree again. That we will never be separated from God again. That we'll be with Him and live with Him eternally. Because of Jesus. Because we are sons of God in Him. He is feeding us with His life now, and He will so feed us forever.

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.