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Pentecost 14

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“Changing to Word, or the Word Changing You?”
Text: Mark 7:1-13; Isaiah 29:11-19; Ephesians 5:22-33

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

We all do it. We all think we know better. We know what’s right. We know what’s good. At least, good for us.

We all do it. We’re all experts in our own lives. What we want, what we need, and how to get what we want and what we need.

We all do it. Children think they know better than their parents. Employees think they know better than their bosses or managers. Players think they know better than their coaches. Pastors think they know better than their District President. Drivers think they know better than the traffic laws. And where else? How do you do it? ‘Cause we all do it.

And then this too, of course: we think we know better than God. That’s why we sin, after all. Doing what we want, not what God wants. That’s why we disagree with certain things in the Bible. Questioning God and His ways and His love. We know better, and, well, I think He should do things my way and agree with me. Just like my boss should, and my parents should, and my coach should, and the laws should. Do it my way, and then this world would be a better place.

Right.

We don’t put it like that, though. So crassly. We make what we think, what we want, sound good, not rebellious. We call it fairness, freedom, reason, love. And maybe, when it comes to people in the world, maybe sometimes we do know better. But when it comes to God, good and pious sounding names and rationalizations don’t change the fact of what we’re doing: going our own way, and expecting God to bless us in it.

That’s what the Pharisees had done at the time of Jesus. They had lots of rules and traditions that they made sound pious and holy and made them look pious and holy, but that weren’t good at all. One of them was this thing Jesus mentioned in the Holy Gospel today, something called “*corban*.” To explain what that was in a modern way of thinking . . . it was as if I made out my will and said in it that all my earthly possessions I give to God. And so after I die, all I have is His. So *really*, it’s all His now. But until I die, I get

to use it. But - and here's the kicker - I can use it, but I can't use any of it for, like, you know, taking care of other people, like my parents. For then I would be robbing God of what's His. So mom, dad, I'm sorry. You're on your own. I promised, I "corban-ed," everything I have to God.

Oh, what a holy person, that Pharisee! He's giving all that he has to God!

But Jesus thinks otherwise. That's not what God wants. That's not what He commanded. That's not good or holy or pious at all. God said: **Honor your father and your mother.** Honor them as God's representatives for you, to take care of you and provide for you. And you, in turn, obey them, love them, serve them, cherish them. Take care of them. That's God's good order. And this corban thing? No. You are **making void the word of God by your tradition.** By what you think is good. By what you think is better than the Word of God.

So, stick to God's Word. Okay, that's pretty clear. Maybe obvious. Especially to Christians. So let's dig a little deeper. Here's really what I want to think about a bit today: *why?* Why should we stick to God's Word? Why should we do what He says? Why does it matter?

Some would simply say because that's the rules, that's the commandments. Like when children ask: *why do I have to?* And parents respond: *because I said so!* All you kids out there . . . that doesn't really fly, does it? That's not a good answer. And you parents, it might be right, but it's not a good answer. And it's not really why we should stick to God's Word and do what He says, either.

Because what that does is make the Bible a rule book. Just a book of dos and don'ts because God said so. But the Bible is not a rule book. It has rules and commandments in it, yes, but it's not a rule book. There's an old acronym you may have heard, that the Bible is **Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth** . . . ugh! No! That's not it at all. **The Bible is a Jesus book.** It is the book that teaches us about Jesus and who He is and what He has done for us, and so it is a book that teaches us about God and all that He is and does for us. Because that's what we need to know. He - not rules - is what saves us.

So what happens when we change God's Word? When we change a book that is all about Jesus? What happens when we substitute something else for what He said? **Then we also change the way we think of God.** And not for the better.

So take, for example, the Pharisee's "corban." How would that tradition change the way people thought about God? Well, it is basically saying that God doesn't want you to take care of your parents - He wants your money instead. So what kind of God is that?

Or, how about some modern day examples - if we can be whoever we think we are, and

that doesn't have to have anything to do with how we were born or any objective, physical reality . . . then that influences how we think about God. That God made a mistake when I was created. Or if what I think determines reality, then God is whoever or whatever I think God is or should be.

Think also about marriage, which Paul is talking about in the Epistle today. Marriage has undergone a lot of changes lately. Redefinition. *Does it matter?* . . . besides God simply wagging His finger at us and saying: because I said so! Well according to Paul, yes! Because, he says, our earthly marriages reflect a greater reality. Because this one flesh thing, this submission thing, this laying down your life thing, this faithfulness thing - Paul says, I'm talking about ***Christ and His Bride, the church***. So mess up marriage and we mess up how we think about God.

And we have messed up marriage, haven't we? And I'm not even talking about anything that has happened lately - it goes way back before that. How many think marriage is optional, just a piece of paper? That divorce is normal, natural, and acceptable? That marriage has nothing to do with sexuality and children - you can have those and not be married! I don't think it's a coincidence that the many changes we have seen in our culture have gone hand-in-hand with many changes in how people think about God. You can argue which one came first, but they most certainly go together.

And so what has happened is this: we've lost our faithful unto death, loving, giving, merciful, gracious God. Because we thought we knew better. Better than His loving, giving, mercy, and faithfulness. And though we didn't perhaps set out to do it, by this thinking that we know better, we've remade Him into our image. And that's most certainly not better.

That's why Jesus is upset in the Holy Gospel we heard today. It's not just about rules and sin. Jesus knew the Pharisees were sinners, and the people around them were sinners, and that you and I are sinners. Rule breakers. Transgressors. That's not a surprise. **That's why He came.** Precisely to forgive our sins. To deal with our sin by taking it upon Himself and dying on the cross with it. To take our place in death so that we might live. That's who God is! That's what He has come to do! But the Pharisees, by their rules and traditions, were making God into something else - a law enforcement God. A punisher. A taskmaster. A because-I-told-you-so God.

And we need to think about that today as well. The creation reflects its creator. It is good and orderly. But if we change it because we think it's not good and we know better . . . *how are we also changing how we think about God?* That's He is also not good? That we know better than Him? Isn't this to do what Isaiah said today: to ***honor God with our lips***, but our ***hearts are far from Him***? It is the pot accusing the potter of not making us (or not making us right!), and having no understanding. That is a dangerous game to play . . . that is really no game at all.

So, as God said through the prophet Isaiah, because of all this, ***I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men - and maybe we could translate that their “so called” wise men - shall perish . . .***

Now what does that mean? What will God do? A wonder-ful, or a wonder-filled, work could be either good or bad - just a work that causes wonder or awe. So what does He mean here? Is He going to wonder us with His wrath against our sin and rebellion? Or wonder us in some other way?

Well, Isaiah goes on to say what he is talking about; what that wonder will be: ***In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.*** And that is, of course, what happened when Jesus came. When the Word of God wasn't: *because I said so*, but came in flesh and blood. When because we keep messing up God, Jesus came to show us who God really is and what God is really like and what God really wants: to heal us and save us from sin and death. And not just to show us, but to do it. To be God for us. The God who is a faithful husband to His Bride. The God merciful and gracious. The God who gives Himself for His people, for His creation. That our sins be forgiven and our life be restored.

And yes, even the rules and commandments of God are for this purpose. They are to protect us and to protect the gifts God has given us. His gift of parents and family, His gift of life, His gift of marriage and sexuality, His gift of possessions, His gift of a good name, His gift of a peaceful and quiet heart, His gift of Himself and His Name and His Word. That as His Bride we have all that we need and rejoice in our heavenly Bridegroom and His goodness. Not looking to ourselves and what we can do or the name we can make for ourselves, but look to our Saviour and rejoice in what He has done for us and the name He has given to us.

So to keep God's Word, to do what He says, isn't to try to get something from God - He's already given you everything. You belong to Him and all that He has is yours.

And don't keep His Word and do what He says simply because He said so and so you have to! That's what slaves do, not sons and daughters.

Rather, keep His Word and treasure it and follow it, because we're treasuring and following not just words or a book, but Jesus - the Word enfleshed. Because He is my Saviour. Because He gives me life and a future. I don't want to change the Word because I don't want to change Jesus or lose what He has done for me. For when you look at Jesus, you see not a because-I-said-so God, but an I-died-for-you God. Not a taskmaster God, but a serving God. Not a law enforcement God, but a forgiving God. Not a God you

have to be unsure of, but a God who is faithful to His Bride - to you! - even to death.

And now this faithful Bridegroom, who (in the words of St. Paul) has washed you clean, that you be *without spot* of sin *or wrinkle* of death, that you *be holy and without blemish*, just as He is, now feeds you with Himself. As we heard the last few weeks, the Bread of Life, to give you life. His life. Life that will never end. Your great sin overwhelmed by His even greater forgiveness. Your fearsome death overcome by His even more wonderful resurrection. Because as His Bride, all that is His is yours. That as Isaiah said, your eyes will see and your ears will hear and your heart will exult.

That's who God is. That's who God is for you. And when we fill our ears and eyes and hearts and minds with what is not His Word, we miss all that. And we are less, not better, for it.

Because better, far better, than changing the Word, is for the Word to change you. From death to life. From uncertain to confident. From sinner to saint. From alone to family, a child of God in His family. And He has. You have His Word on it.

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.