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Pentecost 21

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Follow Jesus, to the Cross, to Life”

Text: Mark 10:17-22; Hebrews 3:12-19; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

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

Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

I wonder what caused this young man to ask this question of Jesus. Maybe something happened, shook him up, that caused him to think about life and what it's really all about. Maybe one of his parents died. Or maybe suddenly and unexpectedly, a good friend. Times like that make you think. He had a good life. He was wealthy. And it seems like, by all appearances, he was a good person; an upstanding citizen. He didn't kill or steal or lie. He takes care of his family. But then death! What then? What will happen to me when I die? Here, I've got everything under control. Things are good. But when you die, you lose all control. Then it's out of your control. So what must I do, here, now, to make sure that when I die, I will have eternal life?

Or maybe, even though he seemed to have it all in this life . . . still, maybe there was something missing. We see people like that today: celebrities, the rich, the powerful, the popular, the successful, the A-listers, those climbing the ladder of success and of society - they seem to have it all. Yet many are not happy. They turn to drugs or sex to dull a pain or emptiness they cannot make go away. Or sometimes their stories end in suicide - and the world is shocked. Why? They had it all! Except they didn't. And what they lacked was enough to make them so sorrowful, so empty, so desperate, that by comparison even death looked good. They craved something they didn't know how to get.

Maybe you know the feeling. Maybe you've asked some of these same questions.

So this young man goes to Jesus. A good place to go for answers. I wonder if he had already gone to the Pharisees and asked them. That would make sense. They were the *religioso*, the teachers, the ones with the answers in those days. If he had, they would have told him to do good, to keep the Law. But maybe that answer was not cutting it. This young man seemed to be doing that . . . or, at least, he thought so. And yet still . . . nagging doubts, questions, emptiness . . .

So he goes to Jesus. For Jesus has gained a reputation. He teaches like no one ever has before. He teaches with authority. He gives answers that leave people speechless. He

knows the Word of God like He wrote it or something! So this young man goes to Jesus. Maybe here he will get an answer . . .

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Well, he gets the same answer that the Pharisees did or would have given him: do the commandments. Do the Law. Be good. Was he disappointed? Or, maybe, hopeful? That that was the answer after all! That he was good! Good to go! So all he needed was approval from Jesus. Confirmation. A slap on the back. An “atta boy!” But no. There’s *one thing you lack*; one more thing you must do, Jesus says.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. I know the answer you’re thinking of in your head right now: *he has to sell all he has and give to the poor.*

But no again. That’s not the answer. Not really. Jesus says: *one thing you lack . . . you must come and follow me.* You see, the wealth, the treasures, they’re not the thing. It’s not wrong to be rich. But they were holding him back. They were holding him down. They were his anchor holding him fast to this world and life, and preventing him from following Jesus. So because of that they had to go. It wasn’t really about the wealth - **it’s about following Jesus.**

Because even if you don’t have great wealth like this rich young man, you can still have anchors that are holding you down and holding you back and preventing you from following Jesus. Wealth is a popular one, but it’s not the only one. **For all the things we have in this world and life, they’re good gifts from God; but they make lousy gods.**

In the Epistle we heard today from Hebrews, we heard an example of that - about the people of Israel after they left Egypt and were in the wilderness. I hope you remember that story, about the Exodus. But what you might not remember is that when Israel left Egypt, they left fabulously wealthy. The Egyptians had given them all kinds of riches to get them to leave! They’d had enough of all the plagues that were ruining them. (Though it wasn’t really the Egyptians - it was God who had put this in their hearts.)

So Israel was rich. God had made them rich. But what did they do with their riches? They made a golden calf. Their riches made them poorer. **The things we have in this world and life are good gifts from God; but they make lousy gods.**

This young man had his own golden calf, didn’t he? He had great possessions, and he not was willing to let them go. He thought they were giving him life, but they really were robbing him of the life he wanted, he craved. They were riches that were making him poorer. They were a lousy god.

What is it for you? What good gift from God do you find getting in the way of Jesus? Do

you find yourself clinging to instead of Jesus? That you look to for happiness instead of Jesus? A good gift that is a lousy god.

So either go away today sorrowful and keep your good gifts and lousy gods, or repent and follow Jesus.

Notice I did not say that you had to sell everything and give to the poor. Remember, this story isn't about the riches, but about following Jesus. Maybe you will decide that there is a lousy god in your life that has to go - whatever or whoever that is - that you have to get rid of so that it won't keep dragging you down and holding you back. Maybe so. But what Jesus really wants is for you to follow Him. That His good gifts remain what they are: His good gifts to you; and that He remain for you what He is: your good and gracious God, the source of your life and all good things. That whether God blesses you with a wealth of riches or friends or power or popularity or success . . . or whether He doesn't - that it make no difference in your life. That with it all or without it all, you have Him. You follow Him. For with Him and in Him you have eternal life.

For when you follow Jesus . . . *well, what does that mean?* Many people will immediately think that it means to obey. To be good. But this young man already thought he did that; was that. But still Jesus told him to follow. So it must mean something more than that. And indeed, it does. For when you follow Jesus, you follow Him all the way to where He wanted to go, the reason He came, and where He wants you to see Him in all of His loving, merciful, serving glory - **you follow Him to the cross**. For there, in His death, is your life. There is not a lousy god, but a good God, who lays down His life for you.

So, Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Answer: you must come and see Jesus on the cross. There, and no place else, is your eternal life. For there is the forgiveness of your sins. There is the defeat of your death. There is God Himself, taking your hell for you, so that His resurrection provide the way out of death and hell for you. That when you die, you have eternal life. Nothing you do in this world and life can do that, provide that, for you. If you think so, you will find that in the list of lousy gods, you top the list and make the lousiest god of all!

But there is a good God, and He doesn't just want to be a good God, He wants to be **YOUR** good God! And so He tells this rich young man, and He tells you, and He tells me, follow me. Follow me to the cross. For there is where you inherit eternal life. And the proof? That would come three days later . . . that ***the one thing we lack*** for eternal life - resurrection! - we lack no more.

Seek the Lord and live, the prophet Amos said today. ***Seek good . . . that you may live***, he also said. The rich young man in the Gospel today was seeking. For assurance? For answers? For peace? *For life*. But if you look to yourself, you won't find it. If you look to

what you can do or accomplish, you won't find it. If you look to things in this world, you won't find it. There's only one place where all of that is: Jesus. Follow Him, not to earn it, but to receive it.

So for us today, we follow to Jesus on the cross where He has put Himself and His cross for us. For we can't time travel back 2,000 years to Jerusalem and Golgotha, and you don't have to. He who created time and transcends time puts Himself and His cross here for you. He puts Himself and His cross in baptism, where you die and rise with Jesus. He puts Himself and His cross in His Supper, where you eat and drink the Body and Blood that hung on the cross and rose from the dead. He puts Himself and His cross in His words of Gospel and Absolution, where you hear those same words that He spoke from the cross: *Father, forgive them*. And you are. And in letting go of the things of this world and clinging to Jesus here, in these places, where He has put Himself for you and promised to be for you, you have Him and His cross. You have Him and His resurrection. You have Him and His life.

So, *Good Teacher, what must we do to inherit eternal life?*

Answer: come and get it! For here is your Saviour, here is your Jesus, and here is His life. For you.

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.