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Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“You Can’t; He Can”

Text: Luke 14:25-35 (Philemon 1-21; Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

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

How did you do it?

Seriously! How did you do it? How did you become a disciple of Jesus? Because you are. You’re here. You confess. You’re a Christian, a follower of Jesus.

But you don’t measure up. In fact, according to the words we heard today, frankly, do you even come close?

I mean, hate father and mother? Hate your wife and children? Hate your own life? Renounce all you have?

Even allowing for the fact that the word “hate” here doesn’t mean despising and being against your family or your life so much that you wish them ill or wish them dead, but means what you’re willing to leave behind in order to be a disciple . . . still, how did you do it?

For can you really and honestly say that you’ve never put family before God? That you’ve never been silent because you didn’t want to offend? That you were never more fearful of what your family would say or think or do more than God?

Can you really and honestly say that you haven’t followed your own desires and urges rather than the Word of God? That what the world says seems better to you than what God says?

Have you never - at least temporarily - put down the cross because of the ridicule or persecution that was coming your way? Have you never compromised to avoid hardship or conflict?

Can you say that? ‘Cuz I can’t.

So how did you do it? How did you become a disciple, and stay one, and be here today? Seriously.

Or maybe you haven't. Maybe you're just fooling yourself. Wishful thinking. Call yourself a disciple when you're really not. That's what the world thinks, after all. That's the accusation they'll throw in your face. That you're a hypocrite. That you call yourself a Christian, but you're no better than the next guy. In fact, you're worse, because you call yourself a Christian but don't live like one.

And that's especially what the devil wants you to think and believe, too. Using Jesus' own words, the words we heard today, to prove it. See? Disciple? Right! As if! You? You're rather the unsalty salt Jesus talked about today. That's who you are. Good for nothing! Not even for the manure pile! Not even good enough for manure. Ouch.

But if you look at your life, you know he's right, don't you? And if judged by your life, you'll be thrown someplace worse than the manure pile.

So thank you, devil! Yes, thank you . . . for reminding me of this truth. And for being Jesus' stooge. Because you mean to drive me away from and separate me from my Jesus, either by making me try to clean myself up and try harder and rely on myself, or by making me despair and think I have no hope. But I'm not here for that. I'm here to repent. And find my life - and my discipleship - not in me, but in Jesus. Which is how He meant for me to hear these words.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

That's what Jesus said. So I'm going to hear what Jesus has to say to me, not you, devil. That's the ace up my sleeve. Or better to say, the word of truth in my ear.

Because you know, devil, the first thing I heard that made me a disciple? It wasn't how good I was or what I did or anything in me. It was this: **I baptize you**. You see, that's when I became a disciple. It's what Jesus did, not what I did. He made me a child of God. He cleansed me. He gave me this life. With those words and water, He took this worthless person from the manure pile and made me His own. How 'bout that, devil?

And while you're right that I haven't lived that way, and I've fallen more times than I can count, you what else I hear in these ears, devil? Not you better improve or get better, but this: **I forgive you**. You see, that's what keeps me a disciple. What Jesus keeps giving to me, not my improvement. So even when I repent, it's not to do something for Jesus, it's to hear these words of forgiveness. That I can't make salt salty again, but He can. And does.

So you're pretty good, devil, using these words against me. And you actually get me to believe you sometimes, and not believe God. 'Cuz you know how weak and stupid I am.

But I remember how you tried to use these words against Jesus, Mr. Devil. Do you remember? I'm sure you do, though you'd rather forget. It was while Jesus was on the

cross. You had all those people come by and mock Him. Yeah, He thought He could establish and build the Kingdom of God, but He couldn't complete it. He thought He could fight this spiritual war, but look at Him now. How do you spell failure? J-E-S-U-S! The picture in the dictionary next to the word failure? Yup, that's you Jesus!

But what happened, Mr. Devil? He shut your filthy mouth, didn't He? 'Cuz you thought He was dead, but He rose to live again. You thought He was defeated, but He descended into hell and proclaimed His victory. You thought you were the king of the world, but now look at you - you're like a gun with no ammunition; a sheath without a sword; a bomb without any explosive. You look all bad, but are nothing. My sins are forgiven and cannot condemn me. My death is defeated and cannot hold me.

And then I hear this hear, too, Mr. Devil. Jesus shut your mouth, but you know what I hear here? He *opens* my mouth. And you know what He puts in? **His Body and Blood**, given for me and now given to me! Yup, the same Body and Blood you thought was dead, that you thought you beat, that you thought was going to decompose in the tomb. It didn't. He lives, and now so do I. Because of Him. You are what you eat, right Mr. Devil? So I am a son of God, a child of God. I am dead and risen with Him. I followed Him through death and the grave. Or better to say: He *pulled* me through death and the grave with Him to life again. Which makes me a disciple.

Because all those things I can't do, Jesus did. He did leave everything behind. He did give up everything. He didn't let anything or anyone move Him from His mission. He did take up His cross and die. For me.

And for all these people here today, too, devil. Because they've been Great Commissioned. Remember those words of Jesus? He told His disciples - who weren't really good at being good either - He told them: Go and make disciples of all nations, by baptizing them and teaching them (Matthew 28:19). By forgiving them and putting Jesus' words into their ears. That's how you disciple someone. They don't do it. Jesus does.

So yes, devil, I know you'll keep trying. I know you won't give up. I know you'll be fighting to the end. And I know I'll keep falling and failing, try as I might to be a good and faithful disciple. You know how weak and stupid and unable I am. So I'm just going to die. That's what a cross is for, after all. But it's Jesus' cross that I die on, devil - not my own. I die with Him, not apart from Him. And so I'll rise and live with Him, too. I'll keep repenting and admitting that you're right about my sins. But I'll keep hearing Jesus' great and powerful words of forgiveness and life, and confess that they're right, too. And that's the life I now live. A new life. As a child of God.

And when I run away, like Onesimus, thank you, Jesus, for sending me a Paul to call me back and send me back to you. And when others come to me looking for forgiveness, help me to welcome them back like Philemon and forgive them, knowing that You have paid their debt and mine. And when faced with the choice between life and good, and

death and evil, help me to know the difference! Because as you know, Jesus, the devil can make good look bad, life look like death, and righteousness look like evil. But fill my ears with Your Word, that I know and choose life and good. That I follow You. Now in this life, and finally crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land of heaven.

So that's how you did it, dear children of God. It wasn't you after all, you're not able; it is Christ, and Christ who lives in You. So you are who He says you are, and you now do what He has done for you and given to you. And so you are His disciple. And even more than that, His child.

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.