

6 October 2019  
Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Three Little Words”

Text: Luke 17:1-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

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

Three little words. You know them. Wives long to hear them from their husbands, and husbands from their wives. Children want to hear them, as do parents, as do friends, neighbors, in fact. For these three little words can make all the difference in the world. And yet how hard they often are to say. How often they have to be just about dragged out of our mouths. Those three little words. You know them. No, not *I love you!* But *I forgive you.*

So I don't know about you, but if someone sins against me and hurts me pretty bad and I forgive them, I'm feeling pretty good about myself. I'm looking for a pat on the back from God. *Did you see what I did? Pretty good, huh?* And then if that person sins against me again and again, and again and again, and I forgive them? Man, I'm looking for a medal! The medal of honor from God for outstanding forgiveness in the face of continual sin.

For imagine a child in the back of the car, being poked and poked and poked and egged on by her brother, and yet she doesn't yell or scream or get back, *but forgives*. I'm giving that child a medal! Or, someone who just continually goads you on with their words, getting under your skin, hitting those buttons which just drive you crazy, and yet you don't escalate or retaliate, *but forgive*. Shouldn't there be a little extra from God for that?

And yet we heard these words from Jesus today: ***So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'***

Really? Nothing? That's it? How can you possibly please a God like that?

But who said you don't please Him? Jesus didn't say that! I think we sometimes hear that in these words from Jesus, but note: Jesus doesn't say that's what God says to us, that we are unworthy servants. It's what WE are to say. It's what OUR attitude should be. To know that no matter how loving or forgiving we may be, no matter how much good we may do, we still have fallen short of doing ALL that we were commanded. And so know that we are unworthy servants. We don't deserve a pat on the back or a medal - you love, you forgive, you do good? Right. That's just what you were supposed to do.

And then there's all that we've failed to do, and in our failure, caused our neighbor to sin. When we're the ones doing the poking. When we're the ones with the goading or demeaning or hurtful words. When we're the ones who don't love our neighbor and so cause him to cheat or steal or doubt God's love for her. When we're the ones who rather than a medal hung around our necks deserve a millstone instead.

Maybe we should put that in our confession, the one we say at the beginning of the service. Instead of saying: *We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment*, say: *We justly deserve Your millstone hung around our necks and to be cast into the depths of the sea*. That's more like it, isn't it?

But then, we say, though that is what I deserve, give me what I don't deserve! Not a pat on the back or a medal - *have mercy on me*, and just speak to me those three little words. I know I've been back here far more than seven times, or seventy times seven times. But I know Your mercy is far greater than all that, than my sin. The cross shows me that, and the one who hung there for me, with my millstone around His neck, with all my sin, all my pride, all my failure. So, please, *for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ*, say those three little words, that I may be *renewed*, that I may, as we say, *delight in Your will and walk in Your ways, to the glory of Your holy name*. Amen.

And He does. As often as you come, He does. As sinful as you are, He does. And these words are spoken right next to that font - you know why? Because *that's* where you were drowned. Instead of casting you into the depths of the sea with the millstone of your sin, to die far away from God, you were cast into the water of the font, the water of baptism, for you and your sin **to die with Christ**. Because dying with Christ, you then rise with Him to a new life. A renewed life. So *yes*, your heavenly Father says to you! In those waters and then time and again after that! Yes, *I forgive you!* Yes, I forgive all your sins.

And then He has you come and recline at His Table. He does not insist on your coming here and serving Him - that's what earthly masters do. Earthly masters who don't care about their servants but only about themselves, and so insist that their servants serve them no matter how tired they are or how long they have worked. But your heavenly Father is not like that. For He is your Father, not your master. And so you, unworthy, grimy-with-sin servant, He washes and cleans with His forgiveness, and then seats you at His Table where He feeds you with heavenly food. And if the thought of that makes your jaw drop and hang open because it just sounds too good to be true, good! But true it is. For you. For you, child of God, with whom your Father is well pleased. Not because of what you *do*, but because of who you *are*.

And knowing that . . . a pat on the back? A medal? *That's* what I'm looking for from God? When He's already given me far more! Like Himself! And His forgiveness! And a place in His family. **Lord, increase my faith!** Help me to treasure these words. Help me to see everything as a gift from You. Help me see as you see and do as you do, and never

stop marveling at Your love.

This is what Paul is talking about when he tells Timothy (and so us) in the Epistle we heard today, to ***guard the good deposit entrusted to you***. Guard this wonderful truth. Timothy as a pastor, but you, too, as Christians. Guard these words. The good news of God's mercy and those three little words we get to hear and get to say: *I forgive you*. Don't let anyone take them away from you - either from your faith or from the preaching you hear. From your ears or from your mouth. Don't be seduced away into thinking God isn't like that. Don't be deceived by some other slick teaching that puts it on you. No! *Guard this!*

But how often do we wind up foolishly guarding other things? Guarding our honor, guarding our position, instead of forgiving. Guarding our wealth instead of giving. Guarding our pride instead of serving. Guarding our need to be right instead of repenting. Guarding our own little kingdom instead of looking to His. And guarding . . . what else? What is it for you? Perhaps here it would be good to remember that what you guard is your god. A false one, to be sure. But why else are you guarding it, why else are you clinging to it, why else are you refusing to give it up, except that you think it is what you need, what you want, what will get you what you want. And that's what makes it a false god - that it's what you fear, love, and trust in; it's what you are looking to for what you need, for all good. How confused we sometimes get!

That's why Paul added some important words to that verse: *Guard the good deposit entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us*. On our own, we get fooled by the devil's wiles. On our own, we get confused by the devil's tricks. On our own, we get seduced by the devil's lies. And so guard the wrong things.

But you're not on your own. You've been given the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is the one who gives you Jesus and enables you to put your faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit gives us the gifts of God. The Holy Spirit then acts as guard over your heart as well. For when you are attacked by what you can see and what you can't see. For when you are misled and wander and maybe desire something new, something flashier, something that sounds exciting. Guard the good deposit, Paul says, which is to say: Guard those three little words. Be like a hound dog with a bone (as Luther put it) and do not let them go! Those three little words. For those words, and the one who speaks them from the cross and did them on the cross, and then rose from the dead for them, is your life. And Him alone.

And so when you forgive, when you speak those three little words, you're not earning anything - you are simply giving what you have received. You are clinging to Jesus by faith, and you are giving Jesus to others. You are trusting Jesus to provide for you and protect you, and to work in the one you forgive. You are looking to Him for all that is needed. Looking to Him not for what you think you deserve, but for His gifts. Which is exactly what He loves to give. Gifts that never run out.

And what about those flying mulberry trees we heard about in the Gospel? Well, I guess none of us has a faith as it should be. We are all unworthy servants. But the thing about faith - it's not the strength of your faith that makes the difference, but the strength of the one your faith is in. And I know He can make mulberry trees fly. But even more, He can make the dead live. And He has raised you and me - who were dead in our trespasses and sins - to life in Him now. And He will raise you and me from the death of our graves to live with Him forever. Because of those three little words. Those three little words that we so need to hear, that make all the difference in the world. *I forgive you*. Which really is His way of saying those other three little words: *I love you*.

*Additional ending for Hope Lutheran Church, our satellite mission church, worshipping for the first time in its new location:*

And may those three little words be always what is proclaimed here, and what this church be always about - because they are the three little words that truly give us . . . HOPE.

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.