

17 May 2020  
Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Free in Christ, Free to Live”

Text: John 14:15-21

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia.

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

I was reading the latest Lutheran Witness the other day . . . there are some articles in it that address the pandemic, and some mention is made of the plagues and pandemics that have afflicted the world in the past, including the early church. How, often, Christians didn't run and hide in fear, but loved and served their neighbors - even those who weren't Christian. Here's one of the quotes:

*During the Plague of Cyprian in A.D. 249, a plague that devastated the ancient world, Romans were astonished that Christians risked and sometimes gave their lives to care for plague victims, including those to whom they were not related and who did not share their religion* (Lutheran Witness, May 2020, p. 4).

Now, I'm sure not all Christians did that, and I'm sure that there are some Christians doing that today. Health care workers and first responders, to be sure. And others. But, in general, overall, that doesn't seem to be the attitude of most today. Instead there is hoarding, separating, isolating. Which got me thinking . . . *Why? Why is there such a difference? What did they have that we don't have?*

Some, perhaps, would say that they just didn't know as much. They were dumb; we're smart. We know so much more now. Maybe. But they knew death. They knew that caring for others might mean losing their own life, even if they didn't know why or how, and they did it anyway. So again, I ask, *what did they have that we don't have?*

Well, nothing, really. But perhaps there is something we have that they didn't - *an attachment to this world*. An attachment to the world which then divides us from our neighbor and even puts us into competition with him. An attachment to this world which makes us cling to life as something that is passing away, rather than as something that is just beginning. **Life as something that is ours to lose, rather than a gift we receive.** If that's so - and I think it is - that's quite a different worldview, and would cause quite a different reaction to plague and pandemic, and any other sickness, disease, or problem that comes our way. And so we marvel at those early Christians and what they did. And I

think they would marvel at us and what we are doing. And how we think about life and what it means to live.

*For what does it mean to live? Simply to breathe and eat? If so, then self-isolating and social distancing is the way to go. But if it's more than that, if Jesus was right when He said that *life is more than food and the body more than clothing* (Matthew 6:25), then maybe those early Christians have something to teach us about life and living. Maybe they weren't so dumb and maybe we're not so smart, after all.*

And Jesus had something else to say about life, and we heard those words today from St. John. Words that Jesus spoke on the eve of His crucifixion when, according to the biological definition of life, His life was going to end. But that's not what Jesus said. He didn't say: *Because I die, you will live*. Instead, He said this: ***Because I live, you also will live***.

To some, those are the foolish words of one about to die. To others, though, they are the confident words of the one who has come to conquer death *for* us, and to give His victory over death *to* us. Words of resurrection. That just as all life came from Him in the beginning, so all life comes from Him now. Death and the grave would not be able to hold Him, and so it will not hold us. **Because He lives, we also will live.**

And not just *live and move and have our being* - that is, breathe and eat - as even the ancient poets at the time of St. Paul said. But live as Jesus lived. His life given, His life lived. Loving others, serving others, and laying down our lives for others. Because we know we have His life - and that nothing in this world can take that away from us.

Which gives us tremendous freedom! We long for the freedom of being able to be back in church all together again. We long for the freedom to go out and do all those things we used to do - like get a haircut! We long for the freedom of when this pandemic is over and we need fear this virus no longer. But that last is really a freedom we already have now! In Christ. With His life. Which it seems that those early Christians knew, as they loved and served their neighbor. They didn't do that because they had to; they did that because they could. Because nothing in this world could take Christ or His life away from them. And so Christ's love for them and their love for Christ was made manifest in how they lived. *It showed*.

And so, it seems their attachment to this world and the things of this world was healthier than what we see in many today, *because it was weaker*. Or perhaps we could say it this way: If we love what gives us life, then if we think our life is in the things of this world, we will love these and fear losing them and be attached to them, and live accordingly. But if we know our life is *from* Christ and *in* Christ, then we will love Him and live like Him.

Which is, in fact, what Jesus says to us today: ***If you love me, you will keep my commandments.***

Notice that Jesus does NOT say: *If you want to be saved, you will keep my commandments.* Saving is what Jesus does. Jesus kept the commandments, all of them, from A to Z, from alpha to omega, perfectly, **for us.** To give us life. Theology calls that His active obedience. Everything required of us, every good deed to be done, every evil deed to be avoided, Jesus did for us, on our behalf. He fulfilled all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). There is no righteousness left for us to do that He has not already done. He kept the commandments because of His love for His Father and His love for us. We receive God's good and goodness through Jesus.

So for us to keep the commandments, therefore, **is to continue the work of Jesus.** What He did, we do. We heard Jesus say that last week, in fact, in the words right before these, when He said: *whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do* (John 14:12). And in this way . . .

Jesus did not need to keep the commandments for Himself. He already was perfect. He did them for others, for us. He did them to love. He did them to save. He did them for good.

And so now too us. We do not need to keep the commandments for ourselves. Jesus saved us through His death and resurrection. Through faith in Him, all that is His is ours, and all that is ours is His. In Baptism, He gets our sin and death and condemnation, we get His forgiveness and life and salvation, His perfection and righteousness. All that we need, we have. So like Him, we keep the commandments *for others.* We keep them out of love for God, and love for our neighbor. Because the commandments teach us what love is and what love looks like. Others receive God's good and goodness through us as we keep them.

Which doesn't necessarily mean we'll feel good doing these things - we might not; often, probably will not. It probably wasn't easy for those early Christians to take care of diseased and plagued people who didn't even like them or think they should be around! Love is hard work. For love doesn't just do what is easy, but what is hard. Like the cross.

The problem for us, though, is that our faith and love are not perfect, like Jesus', and often fail us. So we don't live as we should. We don't live as we could. We serve ourselves, not others. We hold onto what is passing away instead of what is eternal. We live as if our life depended on what we do rather than what Jesus has done for us and gives to us. That's the legacy passed down to us from Adam and Eve.

And Jesus knew that. He knew we would need help. And so He promises help . . . and a HelpER:

***And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, . . . You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.***

With you and in you. Those sound like almost sacramental words! The Body and Blood of Jesus are, as we say, *in, with, and under* the bread and wine in the Supper. Here, in these words, it is the Spirit of God who is with us and in us, and will work through us. We do not possess the Spirit, though, like an object that we have. He is given to us, rather, like a husband and wife give themselves to each other. They belong to each other, but do not possess one another. They continually give themselves to each other in the bond of marriage. And as the Bride of Christ, Jesus continually gives us His Spirit. To keep us in Jesus. To give us His life. To work in us and through us for others. To keep His commandments.

Husbands and wives say I WILL do this on their wedding day. *I pledge you my faithfulness*. But they don't. Not always. They fail and fall short. But Jesus does not. What He promises, He does. Always. Guaranteed. You need the Spirit and you have Him. And what does it mean to have the Spirit? What we confess in the Creed. It means *the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting*. So that you are here is the Spirit's work. That you are forgiven is the Spirit's work. That you have life is the Spirit's work. That you love is the Spirit's work. And so that you keep the commandments in the Spirit's work, in you and through you. For with the Spirit of Christ, as Christ did, you do.

And so the Holy Spirit does His job of making you holy. He gives you the forgiveness of Christ and the love of Christ, conforming you to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), that you live in that image . . . even though it may look quite ordinary. For that's the thing about holiness - it doesn't always look holy. Except to God. In fact, the holy church often looks . . . well, like an orphan. Poor, despised, alone. For if God were with you, O Church, wouldn't you be bigger, better, more glorious, and more successful?

But the image of Christ in this world is the image of the cross. There will be glory - *later*. But now is the glory of love and service. Getting down and dirty in the muck and mire of the sin in this world and the devastation it has caused. But ***I will not leave you as orphans***, Jesus says. ***I will come to you***. Just as He came in the flesh, so He comes now. Before the cross and after the cross. We are not alone. We are never alone. Yes, it is true that in ***a little while the world will see me no more, but you will see me***, He says. And they would see Him risen, alive, and well. No - *better* than well, victorious over death and the grave. With the nail holes that proclaim His love for us. And so, He says:

***Because I live, you also will live.***

Because Jesus lives (risen from the dead), you also will live (risen from the dead). Risen

from being dead in your trespasses and sins to a new life in Christ. And Jesus' dying and rising are the way to this life. He lays down His life that you may live. And having that life, you can do the same, that others may live. Keeping His commandments, because you have a life to live for others; a life that not even death can end.

And *in that day*, Jesus says, *you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you*. *You in me*, that's Baptism. *I in you*, that's the Supper. You have a God not far off, but close. And more than close - united to us, and us to Him. And having Him, you have His life. Real life. True life. Everlasting life.

That's the life those early Christians had, just as we do. Same Jesus, same life, same gifts, though we live in different times, different ages. Hard to say which is more challenging. We *shouldn't* try to become just like those early Christian. But maybe we can learn from them. And from the Apostles and the early Christian martyrs who laid down their lives - not to plague, but to fire, sword, and beast. *How could they do that? What did they have that we don't have?*

Nothing. What they had is in you, too. The life of Christ, the Spirit of Christ, the love of Christ, and the Body of Christ. Gifts given to you, too. So live *in* them. Live *from* them. Because in Christ, you are free to so live.

For Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia.

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.