

16 February 2020
Epiphany 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Choose Life = Choose Jesus”

Text: Matthew 5:21-37; Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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

It's ugly, isn't it? This epiphany today, of your sin. When Jesus holds up the mirror of His Law, as He did today . . . it's not a pretty face looking back, is it? And it's more than skin deep, our ugliness. It goes to the very core of your being. And mine. To every deep recess of your mind. To every dark corner, behind every door, hidden in every closet of your heart and mind and life. We're not good. We're not right. We're not high. We're not moral. We're not better than most. We're. Just. Sinners.

These are tough words today. Revealing.

For anger, hatred, insults, who hasn't? But it's not just that, is it? It's the anger that I won't let go of, that blossoms into a grudge, and finally bears the fruit of revenge.

Hatred. Not just withholding my love, but deeming that person not worthy of my love, or even care, or any charitable thought. Just wishing they weren't even there. Not in this world and life. Not in my world and life. Their life not worth anything.

And the internet . . . the internet has ramped all this up to a new level! Now there's a whole world of people to hate and insult *virtually*! And anonymously. Tear them down with no repercussions. Opportunities too good to pass up.

Lust. In our hyper-sexualized society, how do you avoid it? How often is the spirit willing but the flesh too weak? Faithfulness is mocked; a quaint relic from the past. Purity in marriage? Heck, why even get married anymore?

And truth? Telling the truth doesn't mean anything anymore because truth is what you make it, or so we're told. Oaths are routinely broken. Lies are only bad if they don't work. So we don't believe others anymore. You can't trust your emails for the scams and phishing, you can't trust your telephone for the fake caller IDs, you can't trust the person knocking at your door, trying to scam you or break in . . . why should I trust you? Even God and His Word. Truth? Well, maybe *then*, but not anymore . . .

It's ugly. Our sin. I'm ugly. My sin. The depths to which we have fallen. And I don't

want to look in that mirror and see that. *Take it away, Jesus! Take it away!*

And that . . . that's just from a couple commandments! Jesus sets a pretty high bar here, for what we're supposed to do, how we're supposed to be . . . and we fall far short. Ugly short. It is a bar, really, impossible for us to get over.

Which makes me think of pole vaulters. You get to see them about once every four years in the Olympics. The best pole vaulters in the world can clear about twenty feet or so. But what if the bar was at 100 feet? There's no way. They're not even close. But heck, if a marathoner can break the unbreakable 2 hour mark, why not? Who's to say we can't? So someone tries. They work harder than ever, get stronger than ever, invent a super pole that can hurl them higher, and finally one day, someone gets up to 100 feet. But just when they get up that high, and try to clear the bar . . . they find out the bar is right against the roof of the stadium! There's no way over. There's no room.

So perhaps you've tried, to keep the Law. Really hard. Harder than most. To get over that bar. But it's right against the roof. You could cut off your hands and feet and pluck out your eyes and remove every part of your sinful flesh, but there's *still* not enough room for you to get over. You could starve yourself and fast and you still can't get thin enough to get over. And it's not a glass ceiling we're bumping up against, that you could smash through if you just try hard enough - but a wall of solid rock. Like a tomb. And you ain't gettin' over, you ain't gettin' through, you ain't gettin' out.

It's ugly. I don't want to look at it anymore. I don't want to look at me anymore! *Take it away, Jesus! Take it away!*

And He does! Not the Law. But your sin, your death, your failure. He came to take it all away.

The Law stays. It is truth. As we heard last week, in the verses right before the ones we heard today from Matthew, Jesus came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Every last jot and tittle. Every iota. Crossing every "t" and dotting every "i."

So Jesus is the one who clears the bar of the Law with His perfect, Law-keeping, Law-fulfilling, life.

And all your ugliness - it's mine, He says. You see that in sports, too. A team messes up, but one of the players steps up and says: my fault. My bad. It's on me. That's Jesus. He says: it's on me. All of it. All the sin, all the failure, all the ugliness. And it's no lie. He actually takes it and makes it His. He becomes the ugly one, the one who crashes and burns, the one who falls short. Your sin becomes His and He pays the price for it.

So Jesus clears the bar of the Law for you with His life, **and then pays the price for**

your failure with His death.

And then He saves the best for last . . . He rolls away the stone of the tomb with His resurrection. That solid rock holding us down and holding us in and crushing us under it's weight, is gone. Now heaven is open again. For you. There is life and hope again for you. In Him. In Jesus. The one who cleared the bar with His life, paid the price with His death, **and opened the grave with His resurrection.** *Take it away, Jesus! Take it away!* And He did.

So after having looked into the mirror and seeing our sin and ugliness, Jesus says: Look at ME now, on the cross, in the same way. *What do you see? What do you see in that epiphany?*

Is Jesus angry? Angry with you? Hate you? No, no, and no. Even those who put Him on that cross. *Father, forgive them,* He prays (Luke 23:34).

And lust? None of that there. Jesus shows true love for His Bride. For you. He gives Himself completely. Lays down His life. Faithful all the way to death. For there is Jesus giving His body and His body parts for you. The hands and feet and eyes that you have used to sin, He gives to the executioner for you.

And you see truth. Promise made, promise kept. A Saviour. Even when it meant a cross. He is who He says. No scam or faking here. For He not only speaks the truth, He is the truth. And He will always speak the truth. His yes is yes, and His no, no. When He says you're forgiven, you are. When He says My Body and Blood hanging here I give to you to eat and drink - *truth.*

So we have hope. **Because He did take it away.** What we don't want to look at. Not the Law, but our sin. To give us life.

Life like He gave to Israel as they found themselves - for the *second* time - on the border of the Promised Land in the reading from Deuteronomy we heard today. The first time they got to this point, they said the people of the land were too big, too strong, too powerful, too this, too that - it is too much for us. And that's how we can be with life in the world at times. We look around and think the people too sinful, too bad, too disgusting, too far gone. I can't love them, help them, forgive them. It's too much.

But Israel could, because the Lord was with them. **Choose life,** He said to them. Which meant *Him*. Choose Him. Not false gods, not fear, not self-reliance. Him. Rely on Him, who can do what we cannot do. For this land He swore, He promised to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He would give. Promise made, promise kept.

And so it is for us. He promised to send a Saviour. *Promise made, promise kept.*

He promised to open the grave and heaven to us. *Promise made, promise kept.*

He promised to send His Spirit. *Promise made, promise kept.*

And when He baptized you, He promised you all that He has done for you: the forgiveness of sin, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. *Promise made, promise kept.*

All that you need, He will see to it, and He will give.

And so is set before us today ***life and good, death and evil***. Life in Christ, life in the world. Life in His promises or life on your own. It really isn't much of a choice, is it? Your way, your truth, and your life? Or Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life? The **way** over the bar, the **truth** of promises kept, and the rolled-away-stone-**life** that never ends. ***Choose life***, He says to us. Life in Him.

Life in Him in this broken, ugly, sinful world. Life as a baptized child of God. Which, maybe we can think of like this . . .

Paul tells us that in baptism you've been crucified with Christ, but also raised with Him to a *new* life (Romans 6). That's what we've been talking about. So, imagine yourself there . . . with Jesus . . . crucified with Him . . . on the cross. See others through His eyes. Even yourself.

If you're on the cross . . . *why lie*? It won't do you any good. Instead repent, confess.

If you're on the cross . . . *why hate*? Is that going to make things better for you? Wasn't there enough of that that led to this? Instead, forgive.

If you're on the cross . . . what about the *lust and the sexuality* in our world that seems like the be all end all, that permeates everything, that defines people, controls people, and wraps itself around them like a python that won't let go? If you're on the cross, that's all pretty meaningless, don't you think?

So all these things, all these people, all these troubles and fears, the cross puts them all in perspective. And puts all our sins to death. That they die and we die to them and rise with Jesus to a new life. A better life. A real life.

And though when you look at yourself in the mirror of the Law, the person looking back is desperately ugly - remember, that's what you look like in the mirror of the Law, NOT what you look like from the cross. From the cross, you look quite different than that. From the cross you are beautiful, the picture of perfection. Forgiven! From the cross,

there is no ugliness in you because it's all on Him. From the cross, Jesus sees you not as you have made you, but as He has made you. A child of God. A bride of the Bridegroom. Beautiful! Glorious! Radiant! An inheritor of eternal life. Even if you can't see it, believe the Word of God which speaks it to you.

And if we can learn to see ourselves or *believe* of ourselves that way, maybe we can begin to see others that way, too. As Jesus sees them. And love them, too.

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.