

6 September 2020
Pentecost 14

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Labor for Your Neighbor”

Text: Matthew 18:1-20; Romans 13:1-10

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

There’s a PSA - a Public Service Announcement, a commercial that tries to sell you on an idea, not a thing - that I’ve seen running a lot lately. About wearing masks. And it’s trying to teach *the public* that wearing a mask is not primarily for your own benefit, but for your neighbor’s benefit. To prevent the spread of Covid by those who have the virus but are asymptomatic. So please, it says, think about others. Please put others first. Wear a mask. Do it for your neighbor.

Now, you may agree or disagree with that and wearing a mask - that’s fine. Not really my point. What I think is interesting is this mindset that is being taught, and *needs* to be taught - to put my neighbor first. To put the needs of my neighbor ahead of my own. In a world where I’m used to competing *against* my neighbor, a world more focused on self-gratitude and self-fulfillment, in a world where we’re marinated in me-first, my rights, my getting, greed is good, thinking - this is quite a change. And a difficult one for many who have been so focused on and thinking in this way for so long - difficult to wrap their minds around. It’s not about me . . . It’s not for me . . . It’s for *them*. Hmmm.

Maybe this is something good that will come out of all this - to turn the thinking of folks. A little less on me and a little more on you.

It’s the mindset of the Christian . . . or, um, er, well, it’s *supposed* to be. But we’re being marinated, too. We’re also being pickled by this other way of thinking. We’re steeped in it. It’s hard not to be effected. And then add to that our sinful nature, which *likes* it putting me first - that’s a powerful one-two punch. And exactly what the devil had in mind. Create Christians in name only - Christians who say they’re Christians, but look and live just like the world. For while maybe he can’t keep you from being saved, he can prevent you from helping others . . .

Now certainly, the world is different than the church and ought to be. They are different kingdoms with different ways of doing things. In the world there are those who serve and those who are served. Some are greater than others. There are different levels of powers and status. And so it must be. There must be bosses and workers, government and the governed, parents and children. If all that gets stripped away, there will be chaos. As Paul

wrote to the Roman Christians, the worldly orders have been established by God for our good. So we submit to our leaders, pay taxes, and all of that. That's all good.

The problem is when this kind of power and status thinking leeches into the Church, into God's kingdom. In the world, it belongs. In here, it does not. In the Church, there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. All are equally sinners, all are equally baptized, all are equally and fully forgiven, all are equally fed, all equally saved. Whatever you are in the world, even if you are President of the United States - when you walk in here, through those doors, there is no difference. Young and old, high and low. All confess together. All receive together.

So when the disciples ask Jesus today, *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* it is a completely wrong question. It is a worldly question that has no place in the kingdom of God. Yet, one that we sometimes ask, too, like, for example, when we wonder where my place in heaven is going to be? Or, what size will my mansion be? That's really who-will-I-be-greater-than thinking.

So Jesus calls a little child over. A little child who was probably playing and not really thinking about greatness or the "adult" conversation that was going on, and He puts this little child in the midst of the twelve - the twelve! The *special* twelve! Jesus' own great twelve! - and He says, here. Here's great. You want to be great? Be this. Or for us, the answer is: stop worrying about your place in heaven or how big your mansion is going to be. Instead, remember those days when you were little and all that mattered was running around and playing outside? What if that's what heaven will be like for you? No worries. You get to be a child again.

Evidently this was difficult for the disciples to understand because this greatness question is going to come up *two more times* after this - including when they bring it up at the Lord's Supper (Luke 22)! Here, My Body. Here, My Blood. Uh . . . that's great Jesus, *but who's the greatest?* And then, Jesus on His hands and knees, washing their feet . . . And then Jesus on the cross, dying for them . . .

Here. Here's great. Stop trying to be great. Because look! You're *already* great in my eyes! I came for you and became a child for you. I came to serve you. I died on the cross for you. How much greater can you be, than to have the Son of God take your sins upon Himself and die for them, *for you?* What can you do that's going to add to that? What can you be to make yourself greater than that? Stop thinking like that. Instead, turn and become like this child. A child of your heavenly Father. Think like this.

Jesus is being like the prophet Ezekiel here. In our Ezekiel study we've noted now Ezekiel uses something called "action prophecies" - prophecies told through what he does more than what he says. That's what Jesus is doing here - kind of an "action parable." The disciples often didn't get His words - not yet, anyway. But how shocking this must

have been. A little child, maybe even just beginning to walk! *This one* is great. Be this.

Be this because, on this Labor Day weekend, we know that Jesus is the one who labored for us. Whatever we need, all that we need, He did. Or to put it in the words of St. Matthew that we heard today: He gave His hands and feet and eyes for us on the cross. He goes and finds us when we lose our way. He loosed every sin that was tied to you, that was binding you and dragging you down to hell, and put them around His own neck and died with them. And then He rose. And so now, not sin, not hell, not death, can claim you. Jesus claims you. He's the one who died for you. So you belong to Him, not them. You're His child, not theirs.

And you come here each week to be marinated in this good news! Out there, the world is steeping you in its way of thinking, but in here, Jesus is. And while the amount of time spent in the world and the amount of time spent here is quite different, there is an advantage here: the Spirit. The Spirit working through the word, through the Absolution, through the Body and Blood of Christ, to give you Jesus and form you in Him. It's a kind of PSA proclaimed here every week, but which is more: because here, the Spirit doesn't just give information or try to convince you of something, but *actually gives* what is announced in the Word. *Actually gives you* Jesus and His life and His forgiveness. That, as we prayed in the Collect today, *we may set our minds on the things that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them.*

Accomplish them. The things that are right. That we act right *because* we think right. That we act right not to make ourselves right, but because Jesus has made us right. You see, that's the kind of thinking we need to be taught and that is so difficult for so many to wrap their minds around. Because in the world, you do right to be right; you do good to be good. But in the Church, it's exactly the opposite: you do right because Jesus has made you right. You do good because Jesus has made you good.

Or to repackage that . . . we're use to the thinking: don't sin so you can be saved! No. You are saved. That's Jesus' labor, for you. His work, for you. Rather, you, don't sin, *for your neighbor*. Like that PSA about wearing a mask - don't do it for you, do it for them. Do it not to be great, but because you already are. Because you're a child of God. So turn your minds around and think like that.

Hmmm. It's not about me . . . It's not for me . . . It's for *them*.

So yes, it's better to cut off your hands and feet and gouge out your eyes and live without them rather than to go to hell with them. But *even better* is to cut off your hands and feet and gouge out your eyes and live without them **so that your neighbor doesn't go there!** So that she can join you like a child, playing on the streets of heaven.

Now, in my experience, we all *say* we would, of course, do this! But only because we

know we really *aren't* probably going to have to. Like the husband who promised that he will lay down his life for his wife - because he thinks all that means is just jumping in front of a bullet, which he probably really won't have to do! So let's be a bit more realistic, shall we?

So let's say . . . what if everyone gouged out their eyes, so to speak, and stopped watching say, porn, there would be no more porn and your neighbor would be saved from it.

What if you cut off your hands, so to speak, and didn't post that nastygram on social media, and so you spared your neighbor from bitterness and shame.

What if everyone cut off their feet, so to speak, and stopped going along with the crowd, but instead walked in the way of love - maybe your neighbor could then join you and do the same.

Or what if I reached out to the one rather than spending all my time with the ninety-nine?

Or what if I cut off my tongue, so to speak, rather than repeating that juicy piece of gossip, and saved my neighbor's reputation?

What if I closed my eyes more in prayer? What if I opened my hands more in mercy? What if I used my feet to run to my neighbor in need? And again, all this not to save myself - *I already am!* Saved. A baptized child of God. But all these things *because* I already am. And so be like Jesus. Being His child.

You see, that's *my* labor, this Labor Day weekend. Jesus has His, for you. And so yours is for your neighbor. And maybe this Labor Day, see your labor in that way! That you are a mask - a mask of God. God using you, hiding behind you and what you do, *for the benefit of your neighbor*. Using you as His blessing to others. So what you do isn't just to make money, what you do isn't to save yourself - what you do, you do as a child of God. Loving others because Jesus first loved you.

That's the marinating, the steeping, the pickling, we need! In the love of Jesus. In His forgiveness and life. Drinking it in with our eyes and ears and mouths. Having Him and His Spirit permeate all that we are, all our thoughts and desires. And so we become that, become Him. That we be enabled to *set our minds on the things that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them*.

Wrap your mind around a world like that! A world filled with people like that. Sounds like . . . well, Paradise, doesn't it?

Hmmm . . .

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.