

19 September 2021  
Pentecost 17

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“De-Worming”

Text: Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13-4:10; Psalm 37:4 (Introit)

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

Have you ever had an ear worm? You know what that is - a tune, or a jingle, or a song that worms its way into your ear and you can't get rid of it. It just keeps playing over and over and over and drives you crazy. I think it's happened to us all.

And this too - a *mind* worm. That's not a song or a jingle but a thought that gets stuck in your head. Maybe it's a worry in your life, a problem from work, or an assignment at school that you just keep thinking about and can't stop. Or it can be something good, too, like an upcoming vacation. When you have a *mind* worm, you do things like forget where you're going when you're driving and forget to make a turn. Mind worms keep you up at night.

Or how about this: I'm going to make another one up - a *heart* worm. That would be a desire that worms its way into your heart. Something you want so badly that it begins to take over your life. You order and schedule your life around this desire. You daydream about it, you obsess about it. Maybe it's a thing, or a person, or an accomplishment. It begins to define you; what you become all about and pour all your energy into.

Ear worms, mind worms, heart worms. None of those things is necessarily bad. It's not bad to have focus, to have goals and dreams, to try really hard for something. We admire people like that. But they can turn bad. Especially that third one: *heart* worms. Ear worms are annoying. Mind worms distracting. But when something becomes more than simply a wish or a desire or a goal, but something that controls you, like a heart worm, that's idolatry. When it displaces God in your heart. When it becomes what you fear, love, and trust instead of God. Something that you fear not having or getting, that you love more than anything else, and that you trust will get you what you want, or where you want, or will make you worth something.

This seems to be what happened to the disciples of Jesus. They wanted to be the greatest. They ask Jesus about it (Matthew 18:1), they argue about it, and they were even disputing about it on the night when Jesus was betrayed, *right after He gave them His Supper* (Luke 22:24)! That's how dangerous heart worms can be. How they can take over your life and crowd everything else out.

That's why, I think, or at least one of the reasons why, when Jesus told the disciples in the Holy Gospel we heard today that He is *going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise*, it kind of just bounces off them. It doesn't sink in. Because all that's on their minds and in their hearts is *which of them was the greatest*. Jesus was nice about it; asked them what they were *discussing*. Mark is more honest; says they were *arguing*. We do that, too, right? We're not fighting! We're discussing!

But you get it. You know what's going on with the disciples, because it happens to you. Ear worms, mind worms, heart worms. Worms of sin and evil from the devil, worms from the world so that we think like them and desire what they desire and value what they value, and even some worms we - and our own sinful nature - come up with on our own. Worms that maybe start out innocently enough, but the longer they live, the deeper they go, the more control they exert, the harder they become to get out, and the more dangerous they become.

We heard about this from James this morning, too, in the Epistle. He talks about the *jealousy and selfish ambition in our hearts . . . passions are at war within you . . . and friendship with the world* (or thinking like the world, desiring like the world, valuing like the world) *that is enmity with* (or contrary to the word and will and way of) **God**. How dangerous this can be.

*So what do you do?* How do get rid of them, these worms, in your life? Ironically, the harder you try the worse they seem to get! Because you keep thinking about them. What you need is a jolt. What you need is to be grabbed and shaken out of it. Maybe it's someone yelling at you that gets the ear worm out. Maybe it's that sudden realization that you just passed your exit on the highway and now need to drive way out of your way to get back - and so you start to focus on that.

For Jesus, it was a child. And to those twelve who were arguing about worldly greatness, grown-up greatness, Jesus says: *Look. This is greatness. If you want to be first, if you want to be great, be last. Serve. Serve children. Be a child*. Or in other words, greatness to God looks a whole lot different than it does to the world. That was just the shock and jolt the disciples needed, though they would need boosters, too, when these worms made their way in again.

And it's why we gather here each week. Because we live in a world of worms. Worms that take our **ears** away from hearing the Word of God, fill our **minds** with other words and so-called truths, and capture our **hearts**. And if left alone . . . well, can cost you your life.

So we gather here each week. To be jolted and grabbed and shaken. To drive those

worms out of our ears, minds, and hearts. And as we're hearing, that's what the liturgy is all about; was constructed to do. It's not to make us feel good - it's to deliver Jesus and His forgiveness and life. To fill our ears and minds and hearts with something else, something different. Something real and true. Something that will not make you great in the eyes of the world, **but realize that you are great in the eyes of God.** For Jesus is the greatest who became the least, the first who became last, to serve you.

So we gather here and confess our sins, our worms. We pray for mercy. We gather after another week of wrong listening, wrong thinking, wrong acting, wrong desiring. We gather as old and young, parents and children, workers and bosses, from here and there, because we've all failed this week. To love God and love our neighbor. We loved and served ourselves instead. We need that jolt, that grabbing, that confession . . . so that the words of Jesus don't just bounce off and not sink in, but be the forgiveness we need, and give the life we need. That you hear once again all that Jesus has done for you; that what Jesus said was going to happen, did happen. He was delivered into the hands of men. He was killed. He was crucified. And after three days He did rise. For you. To raise you with Him. To raise you, dead with your worms, your trespasses and sins, to new life with Him.

So you may not be great in the eyes of the world . . . but does that matter so much when you know you are great in the eyes of God? The world may not think you worth very much . . . but your value comes not from the world, but from the fact that God thought you worth the life of His Son! And you may not get what you want, or *think* you want so badly . . . but maybe that wasn't really worth having. As Jesus said (not too long before the words we heard today): *what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul* (Mark 8:36)?

So we gather here each week, and you know what happens here? Jesus comes and baptizes children of all ages to be His own. Serves them. Makes them His. Applies His death and resurrection to them so that when they die, they will live. With Him. He makes them great.

And Jesus comes and forgives us, His baptized children but who have been prodigal in the world this week, who have had worms worm their way into us again this week, who have failed to live as His children this week. He doesn't reject you; He still loves you. Always will. You're still great in His eyes, and He wants nothing more than to receive you and help you and raise you back to real life in Him. So He does.

Jesus comes and speaks to you, teaches you, words of eternal life. What you hear here aren't the opinions of a man or the thoughts of the world, but the words of Jesus. Words of truth. Words of which Jesus said: *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away* (Mark 13:31). Words which are steadfast and reliable and will not change like the world changes thoughts and truths and opinions. Words that you can depend on.

And then Jesus comes and feeds you with Himself, His Body and Blood, the fruits of His cross. His Body and Blood that took away your sins and still does. And His forgiveness and words and Body and Blood de-worm you, to put your hearts and minds in the right place again. And again and again and again. *As often as you do this*, Jesus says. Because He knows we need it . . . often.

And then you may find something strange happening to you . . . as your mind and heart, your thinking and desires, change. We sang it in the Introit today: ***Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*** You'll get what you've been looking for, just looking in all the wrong places.

So we prayed today for the Lord to *grant us humility and childlike faith*. Humility, to realize and recognize who we are, wormy sinners, and childlike faith to look to Him, our Father, for all we need. To look to the cross and see how much He loves you, how much He will do for you, and how much He values you. So that whatever comes your way, however your life goes, through all its ups and downs, even when death draws near, you'll have that firm foundation that you can rely on.

That's what Jesus wanted His disciples to know as they were arguing about who was the greatest. That what He wants you to know, and what He wants all the world to know. So that's what we proclaim here. His words. His service. For you. Or as we sang:

*Lord of glory, You have bought us With Your lifeblood as the price,  
Never grudging for the lost ones That tremendous sacrifice.  
Give us faith to trust You boldly, Hope, to stay our souls on You;  
But, oh, best of all Your graces, With Your love our love renew* (LSB #851 v. 4).

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.