

25 June 2023
Pentecost 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Strong Hands Are Hol(e)y Hands”

Text: Matthew 10:5a, 21-33; Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:12-23

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

Jesus sent the twelve out . . .

Last week we heard the first part of that. That Jesus sent His twelve disciples out with His authority - ***authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.*** That was the **good** part. He also told them not to take anything with them as they went - just, really, the clothes on their backs. That was the **trying** part. And then He also told them that there would be some who would receive them, but also some who would reject them. They would be sheep in the midst of wolves. They would be delivered over to both religious and secular authorities. That would be, I think we could say, the **bad** part.

And all this not because Jesus was sending them out among the pagans, among the unbelieving gentiles, and not to the Samaritans, who notoriously didn't like or get along with the Jews - Jesus expressly told them not to go there! This is what they should expect *from their own brothers!* From the ***lost sheep of the house of Israel!***

And then the words we heard today - more bad news. Even among Israel there would be families divided, hatred, persecution, and accusations of being in league with satan. When Jesus called those twelve men and told them they were going to be fishers of men, I'm sure this is not what they had in mind! Even if they knew it would be tough . . . *like this?* This is more than they bargained for. More, I'm sure, than they probably thought they could handle.

And you probably know how they felt. It's not easy being a Christian these days. And we have it easy! You have much more than the clothes on your back. You probably haven't been dragged before religious and secular authorities - though some Christians have. But maybe your family has experienced division over what you believe - what is true and what is not. Maybe you have felt the sting of hatred and persecution. Maybe you've been accused of being evil. And maybe you wonder: Is this what it means to be a Christian? Is this what it means to follow Jesus? It's not easy. Not what you expected. How you thought it would be.

We heard from the prophet Jeremiah today similar words. *O Lord, you have deceived me!* he says. *I have become a laughingstock. Everyone mocks me. The Word of the Lord* that he speaks is met with *reproach and derision*. Not his enemies but his *close friends are watching for his fall; they want to overcome him and have revenge on him*. Even if he knew being a prophet would not be easy . . . *this?*

Yes. For so it has been ever since sin entered the world. In the pages of the Old Testament we read, as Jesus talked about today, of brother rising up against brother - Cain rising up against and killing his brother Abel. Of parents against their children - sacrificing their children to false gods, and children against their parents - Absalom rising up against his father David. Of prophets hated and fleeing for their lives. The world the disciples were going out into and the world we live in isn't a brave new world, but the same ol', same ol'. A world of people fallen into sin. And you know what people fallen into sin do? They sin.

Pastors sometimes are surprised their congregation is filled with problems. *Why?* The people are sinners who are going to sin! We're sometimes surprised at the problems in our synod, or in our nation, or in our politics, or where we work, or in our families - *why?* Aren't all these places filled with sinners? And what do sinners do? They sin. And you, too, of course. Some of these problems, troubles, struggles, and divisions are your fault, of your own making.

That's the reality . . . for prophets, for the disciples, for you. This is life in a sinful world, a world full of sinners. Sinners gonna sin.

The question is: *what are you going to do?* When this happens to you, when you are sinned against, what are you going to do? Are you going to sin back? Sin for sin? You wrong me, I wrong you? Maybe that's your first instinct . . . but isn't that what Paul was talking against today in the Epistle we heard from Romans, when he said *do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions?* Isn't that letting *sin have dominion over you?* Isn't that being *a slave to sin?*

But Paul says, **that's not who you are anymore.** You were, and where did it get you? Is it helpful for you to live that way? Is it helpful for the world to live that way? Or is that why our world is like it is? Spiraling down, circling the drain. *Lawlessness leading to more lawlessness.* Sin and satan ruling, controlling, enslaving.

No, Paul says. You're different. **You've been set free from that.** Free from the rule, control, and enslaving of sin. To do something different. **You've been given a new life.** And it's in the verses *right before* the ones we heard today from Romans chapter 6 where he speaks of that. He says there that it is **in baptism** that you were raised to a new life to live a new life. You were baptized so that you would no longer be enslaved to sin. Because when you are baptized, you are not only forgiven, you are *set free* - sin and

death no longer have dominion over you. Because baptism is not something you do, but what gives to you what Jesus has done for you. He set you free from your sins by dying for them in your place. He set you free from the dominion of death by rising from the dead. He set you free from the enslavement of satan, breaking the chains that once bound you.

So you gonna go back? Back to that? There's no future there. Or as they say today, there's no there, there. ***The wages of sin is death*** - now and forever; He who denies Jesus is denied by Jesus - ***but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

That doesn't make it easier to live in our world today, but it does give us hope. That in this world of sin, death, and evil, there is life and the promise of life. You may think you are suffering in silence, that no one else knows. But your heavenly Father knows. Jesus says that ***nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.*** Your heavenly Father knows every sparrow that falls to the ground, and the number of hairs on every head. Imagine that! You may love you kids - a LOT! - but you don't know every time they fall or every hair on their heads! But your heavenly Father does. That's how much you matter to Him. And even more than that, for He sent His only-begotten and dearly loved Son to die in your place! Which makes you pretty valuable. And far more than you can know or even imagine.

And maybe that's enough? That our Father knows, and that He will take care of us. So that when you're sinned against, when you're hated and persecuted, when your first instinct is to sin back . . . maybe you can do something else instead. **Not follow sin and satan in the way of death, but follow Jesus in the way of life.** Love instead of hate. Forgive instead of striking back. Lifting up instead of tearing down. Living in your baptism instead of the way of the world. Which is hard, but good. It may mean sacrifice in this world, and maybe even something you *really* want! But maybe what you *really* want isn't good for you, even if you think it is.

Now don't mistake this kind of life for weakness! To love instead of hate, to forgive instead of striking back, to lift up instead of tearing down, takes strength! Because to love means to speak the truth, even when people don't want to hear it. To forgive means calling sin sin, even when people deny it. To lift up often means not gossiping, not speaking what you know, protecting a person you really don't want to protect. It means what Jesus did: **laying down His life for you.** He did all that *for you*, and calls us to do so for others. So He baptizes us into a new life, His life. And He forgives us when we fail to live that new life. And He feeds us with His Body and Blood to strengthen us in this life. You can't do it. But He does it in you. Which is good. Which is exactly what we need.

And in addition to the prophets, the disciples, and you, who struggle with this, living this new life that maybe isn't the way you thought it would be, and maybe more than you

bargained for, so it was for **Luther** and the other reformers as well. When Luther became a monk, and then a priest, and then a professor, none of it was what he expected. All of it much harder than he ever have dreamed it would be. They would be attacked from within and from without, from the church and the world. They would wrestle with doubts and fear, with their own sinful flesh and failings. And yet somehow, they continued on. Somehow they continued to confess the truth. And on this day, June 25, 1530, 493 years ago, eight German princes confessed the truth of God's Word with the words of the Augsburg Confession, and kneeling, offered their necks to the emperor's sword, preferring death to denying the God who they trusted, **who had saved them.**

And that's the key right there - *who saved them*. If it's the emperor or the world or sin or persecution or hate or whatever else in this world that has the power over your life, then you will bend your knee to them to save your life. But if you've already been saved - and **you have**, by the death and resurrection of Jesus! - and if you have a new life from Him - and **you do** because you are baptized! - and if you have the words and promises of Jesus to forgive you and care for you and acknowledge you before His Father in heaven, and if you know that nothing in this world can take that away from you, rage and threaten as they might . . . that changes *everything*. That changes how you. That sets you free! **Free to live as the child of God you are.**

So have no fear of them, Jesus says, **because you belong to Him**. To Him who created all things. To Him who came and died for you and rose from the dead for you. To Him who promised to come again to raise you from death to life with Him forever. You belong to Him. That no matter how hard life in a sinful world may get - for disciples, prophets, reformers, *or you* - you are not alone, you have hope, you have a Saviour. And so you can do as the prophet Jeremiah said, who began those verses that we heard today from him by lamenting that the Lord had deceived Him, but ended in a wholly different way! Saying, ***Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.*** And as He has done, so He will do. For you. So have no fear of them. The hands of evildoers may be strong, **but the hands of your Saviour have holes** - and that's stronger. That's for you. For your life now, and your life forever.

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.