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Easter 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Fired or Forgiven?”

Text: John 21:1-14 (Acts 9:1-20; Revelation 5:11-14)

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

If Jesus’ disciples had been contestants on the TV show “The Apprentice,” they would have all been fired long ago! Not good enough. Not smart enough. Not talented enough. Look who we find gathered together in the Holy Gospel we heard today. There is Peter, the denier; Thomas, the doubter; Nathanael, the one who, when first told of Jesus, responded “Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth!” And then there are the sons of Zebedee, James and John. They’re the one who asked Jesus for the seats of honor on His right and left. . . . If these guys had *applied* to be Jesus’ disciples, His apprentices, they would never have been hired. In the Divine Board Room, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would have tested them, and found them wanting, and sent them packing.

But Jesus is no Donald Trump. His kingdom is not of this world, and His ways are not the ways of this world. Jesus does not hire and fire on the basis of what we do or don’t do. On the basis of our merits or worthiness. In fact, we do not even ask or apply to be His disciples. We do not choose Him, He chooses us. And choosing us, He does not make us earn the right to stay in His kingdom, or prove ourselves. No, He brings us into His kingdom and changes us. Discipleship is not something we do, it is something He does. He calls us. He enlightens us. He sanctifies us. He keeps us. And rather than being fired for our sins, for our shortcomings, for our doubts and fears, our Saviour calls us in order to forgive us and transform us.

And that’s what we see in the Holy Gospel for today. We see disciples who have been changed and transformed. . . . Now, I grant you, that on the surface it doesn’t look that way! But it is when we compare this story that we heard today, to another, similar story that happened before, that we can see the change in the disciples. Then we can see their Easter transformation – how Jesus has worked in their hearts.

For remember when this miraculous catch of fish business had happened before? It was back at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus was preaching by the Sea of Galilee

(which is the same sea as the Sea of Tiberius we heard of today – just a different name). And while Jesus is preaching, Peter, James, and John are cleaning their nets after fishing all night and, just like we heard today, catching nothing. Jesus tells them, like today, to try again, and when they do, they catch so many fish that their nets begin to break and both their boats begin to sink. And when Peter realizes what has just happened, the miracle and the power of God he has just witnessed, he falls on his knees and says, ***“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”*** (Lk 5:8)

But in today’s reading, Peter is a changed, a transformed, man. After *this* miraculous catch of fish, John says to Peter ***“It is the Lord!”*** and *this* time, Peter is not afraid. This time, in fact, he can’t wait to get to Jesus! He puts on his outer garment and before the other disciples know it, Peter’s jumping out of the boat and into the water to swim and get to Jesus as fast as he can. *Before Easter*, Peter knew only the weight of his sin. *Before Easter*, Peter is afraid to be in the presence of God. *Before Easter*, Peter tells Jesus to leave. But now, after Easter and the peace that Jesus gave (as we heard last week), Peter knows the forgiveness of Jesus. He is no longer afraid. He was not fired. He was transformed.

And then, also, what about Saul? Saul, the persecutor of the Church. Saul, the arrester of Christians. Saul, the last guy *anyone* would pick to be an apostle. And yet he is chosen, and transformed.

And what has happened here – to the disciples, and to Saul, and to us – is that the kingdom of God has come to us. *This* is what we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer when we say ***“Thy kingdom come.”*** With those words we’re not just praying for God’s kingdom of glory, Heaven, to come and the world to end. No, we’re praying for His kingdom of grace to come to us here and now. His kingdom of grace that came, right there, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day. His kingdom of grace that came to Paul on the road to Damascus. And His kingdom of grace that comes to us here today. His kingdom of grace that comes as the Lord comes to us, unworthy as we are, and makes us His own. When He does not fire us, but forgives us.

I think most of the time, when we pray ***“Thy kingdom come,”*** we think only of Heaven. We think only of the scene we heard about in the Epistle, with the angels and thrones and all of that. But that’s too narrow. God’s kingdom is bigger than that. Our Lord isn’t just waiting for us to get to Heaven, cheering us on from afar and hoping that we get there! No, He is active and with us here and now. Active in all our various vocations and walks of life. Active as we raise our families, as we work, even as we go fishing. And most importantly, active for us as He comes to us in His Word and Sacraments, giving us faith, forgiving us, and transforming us. Making us unworthy, frightened, sinners . . . into

disciples.

And so Easter means that our resurrected Lord is still coming to us today – having paid the price for our sins on the cross, having defeated death and the grave, and having hammered His foot down upon the serpent’s head – and comes and calls us ***His children***. . . . That’s one of the interesting things about the Holy Gospel that we heard today. When Jesus calls to these guys from the shore, He says, “***Children, do you have any fish?***” Did you notice that? Jesus calls these big, burly, fully grown fishermen “***children!***” But that is what they are. And that is what we are. We’re not contestants. We’re not apprentices. We’re not temporary hires who have to constantly prove ourselves worthy of God’s love and care and forgiveness, or be fired. We’re His children, because His kingdom has come to us.

But it’s hard to live as children. As we grow older, our minds tell us to be adults. And we *try* approach God like adults, don’t we? Like going to the Board Room. And we defend ourselves and try to justify ourselves and try to show God all the good things we have done and all that we’ve accomplished. But you know what our Saviour will say to us? “***Children, do you have any fish?***” . . . Oh, God uses what we do on this earth. He told His disciples by the Sea that day to bring some of the fish they had caught. And He is using you and what you do to take care of others and to provide for them. How you live and what you do in your life matters. It matters very much! . . . But it doesn’t save you in the Heavenly Board Room. What matters there is only grace – grace that has given us faith in Jesus as our Saviour, grace which has forgiven our sins, and grace that has made us children of God.

And so Peter jumps out of the boat and swims to the shore. He can’t wait to get to Jesus. But look at him when he gets there! Clothes, hair, maybe even shoes, soaking wet, from head to toe! . . . But you know, that’s what *we’ll* look like when we get to Jesus, too. Soaking wet from living in the water of our baptism. Soaking wet from jumping into those waters every day, as everyday we confess our sin and receive our Lord’s forgiveness. As everyday we are born again as children of God. As everyday we remember that in that water, the kingdom of God has come to us.

And having lived in God’s kingdom of grace here on earth, when we are called to His kingdom of glory in Heaven, it will not be a Board Room we enter, but a banquet hall. A banquet hall with a feast for us to enjoy as the guests of honor, just like by the shore that day as Jesus told His disciples to “***Come and eat.***” . . . That feast is here also, on this altar / table. For although we are not in Heaven yet, Jesus has brought Heaven down to us. And already, here and now, we are the guests of honor. For here Jesus is our host, and feeds us with Himself, His own body and blood. And like Peter and Saul and the rest, we

are forgiven and transformed.

Which is a good thing, because look at whose gathered here today! A bunch of people just like those disciples, who aren't good enough, or smart enough, or talented enough – including the guy in the pulpit. At least, this is so by the world's standards. But that's not how our Saviour looks at us. No, here He sees only His children. Children He died for. Children He lives for. Children He prays for. And children He comes for. And so you have nothing to fear. You're not fired; you're forgiven.

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.