

19 June 2005
Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Going Against the Flow”

Text: Matthew 10:24-33

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

Have you ever tried walking through a crowd of people that are all walking the other way? Whether it's downtown Washington or New York at 5 pm, or a crowded shopping mall at Christmas, you know it isn't easy! You can't take more than a step or two without having to stop, shift, start, stop, turn, get bumped and jostled . . . It's very frustrating, and very difficult. And it's very tempting to just give up and go with the crowd, go with the flow. Especially if you didn't know ahead of time that you were going to face such trouble, such opposition.

Well Jesus wants you to know – *ahead of time* – that that's what the Christian life in this world is like. *It's not easy*. For if to repent means to turn around and walk the other way, then know that you're going to be walking against a whole crowd of people still going the other way! A whole crowd of people still rushing toward sin, and none to happy that now you are getting in *their* way! And it can be frustrating, and very difficult, to go against the flow. And very tempting to just give up and go with the crowd again.

And so Jesus wants you to know: turning around and following Him in this life isn't going to be easy. It's going to mean opposition, from a whole crowd of people and beings both visible and invisible, going the other way. That's the nature of our world, as we heard in the Epistle from Romans: ***sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*** . . . A great and mighty crowd, led by Satan and his minions, rushing the wrong way, rushing toward sin and death. And so the Christian life will not mean peace but struggle. Not ease but difficulty. Which, to be honest, *doesn't sound too good*.

But that's *the reality* – the reality of which Jesus is speaking in the Holy Gospel, both this week and as we will hear again in the reading next week. Jesus is honest with us, about how life is going to be for His followers here on earth. And He tells us: if it happened to Him, it is going to happen also to us. Like Father, like son. ***A disciple is not above his teacher, but strives to be like Him***. And so the persecution, opposition, and death that He faced, is the persecution, opposition, and death we will face. Just ask Jeremiah, who faced great

opposition his whole prophetic career; or the Apostles, all but one of whom was killed for the faith; or the early Christian martyrs who faced death by crucifixion or fire or beast; or those Christians in Africa facing the sword of Islam. And the same is true for you and me, who are now sent out into this world with God's Word of truth, to live that truth and to speak that truth. And while the opponents we face in this place today are more likely than not to be wolves in sheep's clothing, it's still not easy walking against the crowd.

But though it's not easy, it's worth it! For though the going is tough now, there is rest and joy and victory awaiting us. Rewards that Satan and no amount of opposition here on earth can take away from us! Rewards earned and promised to us by the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and the victory over our opponents He won for us! And that joy and victory Jesus gives us already here and now, even though there is not yet rest as we walk and struggle against the crowd.

And so though it's not easy, know that you are not alone. Jesus never sends His disciples out into the world without first giving them what they need to go: His strength and His promise. He gives His strength to support us, and His promise to sustain us. Because He knows that on our own we *would* get swept away with the crowd. Because the opposition is too great. Because as we live and speak the Word of God in this crowd in which we live, there is *opposition from Satan*, who does not let go of his own in this world without a fight. *There is opposition from the world*, which does not welcome a message that says there is a higher authority and an absolute truth to which all must answer. And then *there is even opposition from within each of us*: a small voice which does not want you to subject your body and mind and life to Christ and His will, but to follow your own will, whims, and desires. A small voice telling you that the struggle isn't worth it; it's too hard; it's not worth the risk to life and limb; **turn around**, go with the flow and take it easy! Be like everyone else; enjoy the sinful pleasures of this life while you can. And above all else, just keep quiet. That'll make things a bit easier for you, and besides, *they aren't going to listen anyway*.

And you know, that small voice of temptation within every one of us is the hardest of all our opponents to overcome! Because it's very persuasive, and knows how to tell us just what we want to hear, to give us a way out, an excuse, a reason to turn around and avoid the struggle and the opposition. And it plays on our fears: our fear of rejection, our fear of failure, our fear of being made fun of, our fear of the unknown. And it makes those fears in our minds so big and powerful that it freezes us into inaction, into silence, and *turns us* – first **turning us** in on ourselves, so that we are concerned only about ourselves instead of others, and then **turning us** around to follow the crowd and go with the flow. And fear can be a very powerful thing.

And so three times today; *three times* in just the few verses we heard in the Holy Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples ***do not be afraid***. *Do not be afraid* to speak His Word. *Do not be afraid* to live His Word before those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. And *do not be afraid*, because as difficult as it may seem, your Heavenly Father **promises** that He will not let you get trampled or lost in the crowd. As hard as the struggle may get, He will see you through it. For if in the enormity of His creation not even a single half-penny sparrow can fall to the ground without His permission, and if in the midst of the crowd He knows exactly how many hairs are growing on your head at all times – then He knows everything that is happening to you, and all that you need, and He will provide. Every detail of your life. Why? Because ***you are worth more than many sparrows***. Because your Saviour came to lay down His life for you. Because you have been purchased and redeemed not with pennies, nickels, dimes, or dollars – *not with gold or silver, but with the holy, precious blood, and the innocent suffering and death of the Son of God*. That is how much you are worth. And so as you go, your Father, your Saviour, and His Spirit go with you, with His promise of care, and with His strength – the strength of His love and forgiveness that made you who you are: a child of God. His love and forgiveness that will not now leave you on your own.

But it is not only the promise of God's care and presence in this life that gives us strength, but also the wonderful **promise** of the reward that is waiting for us in Heaven. For, Jesus says, ***everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven***. And here, very clearly, you can imagine the two groups of people we've been talking about: those who deny Jesus are those walking with the world and the crowd in sin; and those who acknowledge Jesus are those walking against the crowd, in repentance and faith. One group walking the right way, and one group walking the wrong way.

Except, in truth, it's not all that simple – because we do not always walk the right way, do we? We give in to temptation; we do turn around and go along with the crowd. Sometimes because we want to, sometimes in weakness, sometimes because we're tired of the struggle. And even when we manage to resist, the thoughts of our minds and the desires of our hearts are walking that way, even though we do not want them to! But here we are in good company. For that happens not only to us, it has happened to all of God's people through the ages. Moses and Abraham, Joshua and Jacob, Jeremiah and David, and the Apostles! Peter denied knowing Jesus. They disciples all ran away in fear with the crowd when Jesus was arrested. Fear kept them behind locked doors after Jesus' crucifixion, and caused them to hide and remain silent, just as we are so often tempted.

But that doesn't mean your salvation is in jeopardy! Jesus knows what you're going through. He knows the pressure, the struggle, the weakness; the doubts and fears; the pain

and difficulty. He was here. He lived it. He knows it. And it's why He died for us. To pay for that sin, when we go the wrong way. For the perfection God demands we simply cannot accomplish.

And so to acknowledge or deny Jesus doesn't simply mean which direction we are walking at any given time, *it is more than that*. It means to live a life of faith, even when we stumble and fall. To live a life of faith even when we turn the wrong way. It means to live a life of repentance – a continual turning to our Saviour in faith, to receive His forgiveness; to receive His life and strength. For that is walking the right way. That is walking where Satan does not want you to go. That is walking to the cross.

And we can do that – not because of anything in ourselves – but precisely because we have this promise of Jesus, that ***everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.*** Or in other words, we have His promise of forgiveness. That when we come to Him in repentance, He will not punish us or turn us away; He will not chastise us or tell us how unworthy we are; He will not reject us – but He will acknowledge and confess us to His Father. He will acknowledge us as His brothers and sisters, ones whose sins He bore on the cross; ones for whom He was forsaken and denied by His Father on the cross; ones to whom He now says: I do not hold your sin against you. Apart from that promise, we could not repent! But with that promise and assurance, we can. You can. For you who were once dead in your trespasses and sins have been given a new life. Your Saviour has turned you and given you faith. And the life that you now live is a new life of faith, not fear. Of hope, not despair. And of confession, not silence.

It's still not easy. You know that! But it's worth it. And you know that as well. That's why you are here. To receive again the strength and promise of your Saviour. To confess your sins and receive His forgiveness; to hear His Word of encouragement and strength; and to come to His altar to eat His body and drink His blood, that as your Saviour lives in you and you in Him, you would have the faith and strength to walk this road of life. To walk against the crowd. And to walk not alone, but with your brothers and sisters in this Church. And for this Church to not walk alone, but with our sister churches in our Synod. And for our Synod not to walk alone, but together with all the faithful – all who confess the Name of our Triune God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. And therefore to know that we do not walk alone, but that we have, in fact, a mighty crowd of our own! A crowd here on earth, and of the saints and angels in Heaven who are with us in this same Church, only they enjoying now the reward that will one day be ours.

And so ***do not be afraid***. Fight the good fight. Confess the Name of your Saviour, knowing that though your opponents seem great and powerful, they have already been defeated! Your risen Saviour is proof of that, and He is with you, now and always. You have His promise.

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.