

31 May 2009
The Feast of Pentecost

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Victorious in Christ”

Text: John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15 (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21)

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

There are many misconceptions about what it means to live in this world as a Christian. Popular thinking that starts with a kernel of truth, and then grows wildly to take on a life of its own. One of those is what it means to be a truly “Spirit-filled” Christian. This teaching says that if you are *really* “Spirit-filled,” you will have a faith that never wavers, and always know just the right thing to say. You will be able to stand up and preach like Peter on that first Pentecost, and be bold and fearless. That your problems will be few, and even when they come, no matter what happens in your life, you will be steadfast and able to overcome it all. Sometimes that is called living a “victorious Christian life.” And if you just have enough faith, you can be that way. And if you’re not that way, you just don’t have enough faith - so try harder, work longer, and be who Jesus wants you to be.

But if that is what living in this world as a Christian means, I am afraid I will never attain it. For rather than like that, I find I am more often like the disciples whose hearts were filled with sorrow. I am more often like the prophet Ezekiel, looking around at the world and seeing only dryness and death. I see the wreckage of life. Embattled families and marriages. The carnage of wars and natural disasters, of terrorism and hatred. I see churches sacrificing the truth for secular success and the porridge of popularity. I see my own struggle with sin, which so frequently gets the better of me and I can’t seem to overcome, no matter how hard I try.

What about you? Are you like me? Are you often weak, tired, struggling, doubting, wondering? **If so, today is for you.** Pentecost is for you. To set the record straight. To teach you the truth about what “a victorious Christian life” *really* looks like, and – best of all – to give that life and victory to you. For it’s not something you do - or can do - at all. The victory has already been won! The victory is what we have been celebrating this entire Easter season – that Christ’s death and resurrection is our victory over sin, death, and the devil. And so Pentecost is not about leaving that all behind and now putting the onus on you to follow in Christ’s steps and be victorious yourself. Pentecost is about what John told us today: the Holy Spirit **“taking what is Christ’s and giving it to you.”** Taking Jesus’ victory and giving it to you. And so Pentecost is really *the continuation* of Easter in our lives. It is about

living “a victorious Christian life” not apart from, but in the glory of the cross.

And so we heard today that when the Holy Spirit comes, this is what he will do: he will talk about Jesus. He will **“bear witness about Christ . . . he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”** And those are not two different works – bearing witness and convicting – but one and the same work. For the Spirit convicts you as He teaches you about Jesus, directing your eyes to the cross and showing you the truth. The truth of your **life-stealing sin**, that you repent of your sin. The truth of the **life-restoring righteousness** of Christ, that you look for life not in yourself or what you can do or in the things of this world. And the truth of the **life-assuring** defeat and judgment of Satan, that you not lose heart, but have hope. In all these ways, the Spirit bears witness to the fact that the victory you cannot win has been won for you by Christ, once and for all. And that victory you do now live as you live in Christ.

So it's not that a “victorious Christian life” is a myth, it just looks different than many people think. **Because it doesn't look like victory - it looks like the cross.** It is not lived above and beyond the problems of this life, as if as Christians we can somehow float above them. No, it is lived exactly in the midst of them. Like Jesus, who came into our midst and gave life by giving His life – to all who were dried out, chewed up, and spit out by sin. He came and planted His cross in the midst of our lives, dying for us that we might rise with Him to a new life. A new life not with our heads in the clouds, but with our feet firmly planted on earth, living the cross-life, the Christ-life. Christ living in us.

Which means you're victorious not when you stop sinning or struggling (which is impossible), but when you repent of your sins and receive the forgiveness and victory of Christ. When you fall on your knees and hear those wonderful words: *“I forgive you all your sins . . .”* With those words **the Spirit is taking the victorious atonement and forgiveness of Christ and giving it to you.**

You're victorious not when you grow up and stop needing to rely on Jesus so much and learn to stand on your own two feet. You're victorious when you rely on him *more* every day. Every day remembering your baptism and who you are as a child of God. Every day dying and rising with Christ. Every day receiving his victory, life, and salvation. Growing not up and away from him, but growing into him. **The Spirit taking the victorious life of Christ and giving it to you.**

And you're victorious not when your faith is the marvel of others, but when you who are weak in faith take refuge in your Saviour who gives and strengthens your faith. You are strong when you take refuge in the body and blood of your Saviour, on the cross and on the altar, given and shed for you. And with that body and blood, **the Spirit is taking the victorious salvation of Christ and giving it to you.**

For that's the Spirit's job. Not to make you all that you can be, but to connect you to Christ and give you all that He is. To take what Jesus earned for you on the cross, and give it to you. To restore you, sustain you, and keep you. That Christ live in you and through you, and bear the fruits of faith in your life. And this He is doing, even if your life doesn't look particularly "victorious."

Because satan's going to see to that, you know - that you don't look victorious, but rather, quite weak and defeated. He likes planting weeds, the weeds of trials and troubles, of disappointment and doubt in your life - sometimes big and strong and deep-rooted ones! - to try to get you to doubt your Father and His love for you; to try to get you to doubt your Saviour and His victory for you; to try to get you to doubt whether you really are a Christian at all. Because you sure don't live like one. And if you were a Christian, wouldn't God be taking better care of you? Satan wants to rob you of your faith and pull you away from Christ.

Jesus warned His disciples about this, in fact, in the verses that were snipped out of the Holy Gospel today. That snipping is unfortunate, because those words are so important to help us understand what the Christian life looks like. For right in the midst of all this "Spirit talk," Jesus doesn't tell His disciples about how great and strong and victorious they're going to be, instead He tells them: ***"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."*** Not very good news. Or in other words, don't think its going to be easy. Satan never sits still around Jesus, His Church, or His children. To belong to Christ is to be an enemy of satan, who will not go quietly into that good night.

But try as he might, he cannot have you. That's the good news! The good news of Christ's victory. That even *in the midst* of trials and troubles, Christ and His victory, given to you, will bear fruit in your life. And so **you are victorious not** when your life is problem free, but when you forgive and do good to those who sin against you. **You are victorious not** when you have everything you want, but when you serve others and make sure they have what they need. **You are victorious not** when others look up to you, but exactly when they don't have to – because you are down with them. In the muck and mire, in the blood and carnage, in the sin and wreckage of life, bringing Christ and his cross of victory to a world in need of hope. To a world filled with dry, dead people. And **you are victorious** when others bring that hope to you.

Remember, when Ezekiel looked at that valley, he saw death. We see it too, when we look around at this world. But when God looks at that valley, he sees life waiting to happen. Life through His Spirit, giving the gift of life. For as Ezekiel would tell you, when the Spirit comes, life happens. The life of Christ. The life of

our Saviour who came to us and hung on the cross - not very victorious looking! - as a bag of dry, dead bones. But what looked like weakness and defeat was anything but, as Jesus came out of the valley of the shadow of death alive, and now gives that life to us. And so faith enables us not to avoid or transcend troubles, but to see with God's eyes, Christ's eyes, and trust in the life He gives, even through crosses; even in weeds; even in the worst of times.

And so *“it [really] is to your advantage that [Jesus] go away,”* for he has sent you His Spirit of life. That's what this day, Pentecost, is all about. The sending of His Spirit who, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, is the Lord and giver **of Life**. With Him all things are yours for Christ is yours, and you are His. And so you *are* victorious - not because you look it, or feel it, or think it. But because the Spirit reveals the truth that you are. Victorious in Christ.

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.