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Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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"It's Not About Rules - It's About Life."
Text: Mark 10:2-16; Hebrews 2:1-18

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

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. . . . [H]ow shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

We just heard that from the author of the book of Hebrews. He says not just to pay attention, but to pay *much closer* attention to God's Word. Lest we drift away from it. Drift away - like a boat its owner forgot to tie to the dock, which slowly, silently, little by little, drifts away . . . until it is lost. For to neglect God's Word is no little thing. It is, we are told, to neglect our very salvation.

So perhaps we should translate this verse like this: ***Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from Him.*** Because slipping away from the Word of God is slipping away from Christ. Christ, who is the Word made flesh. Every page of Scripture is about Him. And so to lose the Word is to lose Christ, and to lose Christ is to lose our salvation.

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard . . .

But what does that mean? Well, a number of things.

We could point our fingers at the ELCA this morning, and their recent decisions to, *really*, approve of homosexuality. Those decisions were clearly not paying any attention *at all* to the Word of God.

But that's too easy. Let us not just point the finger at others, what about you and me? Did you hear and pay close attention to the Word of God as it was read just a few moments ago? If I asked you what each of the readings was about, could you tell me? What about the Word of God during the week? And what about the application of the Word in your life? Or is the Word of God, for you, mostly stories about *other* people and *other* times and *other* places, with no discernible impact on your thinking or in your life? The truth is: we *all* need to pay much closer attention . . .

But just saying that is not enough. Because I have not yet mentioned the biggest danger we face in paying attention to the Word of God. It is the biggest danger those who read the Word everyday face. It is the biggest danger those who love and memorize the Word face. **It is to regard the Word of God as a rule book.** That's why folks want to post the Ten Commandments everywhere. They think that God's Word is *primarily* instructions about how I am to live, what I am to do, and how I am to be if I want to be a Christian and go to heaven. That is the biggest danger because it *sounds* so good and right and holy . . . but it's not. It is a great danger.

Now, are there rules in God's Word? Of course. Are there instructions about how God wants us to live? Certainly. But that doesn't make God's Word *primarily* an instruction book or a rule book. For the Word of God is first and foremost about Christ, not you; about His life, not your life; and about what He has done, not about what you must do. And so to **pay much closer attention** to the Word is to hear the Word of God not giving us rules, but giving us Christ, giving us life, giving us hope and forgiveness and salvation. For as we heard just a few verses later, Jesus came not to give us rules, but ***that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.***

And so the Word of God - the Word made flesh *and* the Word proclaimed - is not about burdening us with rules, but about setting us free. Free from death, free from fear, free from slavery to sin. That we may live, both here on earth and forever in heaven.

And so, for example, the Holy Gospel that we heard today. How did you hear those words? Most people, when they hear those words, think immediately: **rules!** *You're not allowed to get divorced. And if you get divorced, you're not allowed to remarry. And if you do get divorced and get remarried, you're no Christian! Because Christians don't do that kind of stuff.* . . . Well, here's a news flash: Christians *do* do that kind of stuff. The divorce rate in the Church is just as high as it is in the world. That doesn't make it okay, it's just to say that if the Word of God is a rule book, we're not doing a very good job. Which is true. That's why we confess - every week and every day - that we are sinful and unclean. Being poor, miserable, wretched sinners, we're not very good at rules, whether in the Church or at home or at work or at school. And rules *were* what the Pharisees were about, which is why they were testing Jesus with their question about marriage.

But how did Jesus respond? Notice: He didn't talk rules with them. They pointed to a word of Moses about rules, Jesus pointed to a word of Moses about **life**. He points them back to the beginning, to creation, when God gave life and made man and woman and joined them in marriage. Because truly, divorce isn't just about keeping or breaking a rule - **divorce is death**. The death of a marriage. The death of

something that God created good. A result of the death Adam and Eve brought into the world when they failed to **pay close attention to the Word of God** and decided instead to pay attention to the word of satan and eat the forbidden fruit. God had said to them that **on the day you eat of it you shall surely die** (Gen 2:17) - and we have been dying ever since. For we have been sinful and sinning ever since. And a good way to think of sin is not just breaking the rules, but dying. Every sin, a little death. The death not only of marriages, but of relationships, of families, of reputations, of trust, of love, of contentment . . . Satan promised our first parents that sin wouldn't kill them, but really give them more and better life! But he lied. And we've been believing that same lie ever since.

And so into this world of sin and death came the Lord of life - the One who is life to *give* life. To not simply show us or teach us about a better way, but to *be* that way for us - the way of life. For we know what we should do - that's not the problem. The problem is that we don't do it! And so Jesus came to be for us what we could not be, to do for us what we could not do, and to give to us what we could never achieve for ourselves - life. Because if you're dead, you can't make yourself alive - something or someone from outside of you must do that. And so the Lord of life came to give us life - life from the dead in the forgiveness of our sins. For if sin is death, then when sin is forgiven death can no longer reign, and if death no longer reigns then we are free to live! Free to live in Christ Jesus.

That's why when Jesus came, He came for one reason: to ascend the cross. To bear the guilt of our sin, die our death, and give us life in the forgiveness of our sins. And His resurrection shows that is exactly what has happened. For Jesus rose from the dead not because He was simply more powerful than death, but because that which *causes* death - sin - has been done away with. And if no more sin then no more death, and if no more death then there is life.

And that's why Jesus now comes to us here. He comes for one reason: to give us life in the forgiveness of our sins. That the life He accomplished in His death and resurrection be not just history, but a present reality for you. And not a life that you have to search for and hopefully find, but a life that He brings to you here in His Word, and in His Word connected to the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of His Supper. For His Word makes this water not just plain water, but living and life-giving water, Spirit-filled water, a water which washes away sins and therefore gives life. And His Word makes this bread and wine much more than plain morsels of food, but His very body and blood, the body and blood which passed through death to life, to give you that life by giving you His forgiveness.

For the Word of God does what it says. The Word proclaimed and given joins us to the Word made flesh, and we are united as one - Christ and His bride, the Church. And what belongs to Christ, the bridegroom, He gives to His bride, the Church. He

withholds nothing from us. And so His victory is ours, His life is ours, His salvation is ours. That we may live, no longer dead **in** sin but dead **to** sin and alive in Him.

And so **for you** there is forgiveness, in Christ. No matter how old you are, no matter how young, Jesus desires to bless *all* His children with life. And all need His life, for sin has inflicted death upon us all. Whether for you that death comes from divorce, anger, hatred, pornography, greed, pride, covetousness, laziness, gossip, lies, revenge, or any and every other sin under the sun - just as there is no sin that does not kill, so there is no sin that Jesus did not defeat and for which there is now forgiveness, and so resurrection to life again. Forgiveness, life, and salvation *for you*.

And so from first to last, God's Word is a word not of rules, but of life. And all Jesus does He does for our life. If that means blessings, then blessings; if it means crosses, then crosses. Whatever serves life, that is what your Lord and Saviour will do for you. You may not understand it always, and it may not be easy, but that's okay. He knows what He's doing, and what He's doing is life.

One of our Elders like to repeat a quotation about that in Bible class, which says: *Jesus did not come to make bad men good, but to make dead men live*. That little quotation says what it took me about fifteen minutes to say (!), and what the Word of God is all about. That's why it's so important. That's why we must not drift away from the "dock" of God's Word and where it is "anchored" here for us in water, words, and bread and wine. Because it's not about rules, it's about life. The life of Christ. Come and receive Him. Come and receive His forgiveness. Come, and live.

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.