

25 February 2018
The Second Sunday in Lent

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Dying to Live”

Text: Mark 8:27-38; Romans 5:1-11; Genesis 17:1-21

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

The only good Christ is a dead Christ.
The only good Christian is a dead Christian.

Sadly, I don't think you will hear that from many pulpits or in many churches these days. Oh, maybe the first one. Most would agree with that first statement, I think. But the second? Not so much. In fact, the second . . . many would not agree with at all. It sounds bad.

And it sounds better to say . . . and many people think this way . . . that to be a good Christian is to be a person who does a lot of good things; who *lives* a moral and upright life; who prays and gives and tries hard. But that identification doesn't quite work, does it? Because there are a lot of people in our world and in our neighborhoods who are not Christian, and yet who we could point to and say they are good, moral people; who pray and give and try hard. Yet that's what a lot of people think a Christian is.

And if that's what we think, then we shouldn't be surprised that people think that *anyone* who lives a good, moral, and upright life, who prays, gives, and tries hard, will be saved. Because then what's the difference? Sure, other religions believe a little differently, but that doesn't matter. What matters, is that you're good and moral and upright . . . however those things are defined by society at the moment.

But what we heard Jesus say today is quite different than that. For after Peter rightly confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus begins to explain to Peter and the others what that means - what it means to be the Christ. And it means this: that He ***must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.*** And that word *must* there is important. It's not optional. There's no other way. For Jesus to be the Christ means that Jesus *must* die. And so according to Jesus, the only good Christ, the only *real* Christ, is a dead Christ.

Peter thinks like us, though. And so takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. *No, Jesus, you're wrong. That's not going to happen to you! You heal people and drive out demons; you teach people and help them.* But these things, Peter, are ***the things of man***, Jesus tells

him. The way the world thinks. You need to think differently. For if doing good things doesn't make a person a Christian, then neither does doing good things make Jesus the Christ. **The only good Christ is a dead Christ.**

Because only a dead Christ can save us from the wrath of God, justify us by His blood, and reconcile us to God. That's what Paul said in the reading from Romans that we heard. That *while we were still sinners . . .* Or in other words, while we were not good, while we were turned away from God and His *enemies* (strong word!) - while that's who we were, *Christ died for us*. To change all that. So if Christ does not die, none of that changes. If Christ does not die, then you are still a sinner - unreconciled, unjustified, and unsaved. **The only good Christ is a dead Christ.**

And so while yes, Peter, Jesus heals and drives out demons and teaches and helps, He does all those things *to point to this greater work*. Those are all just the appetizer, the prologue, the prelude. His real work, His saving work, can only come on the cross. All those other things are nice, but He can be the Christ without doing them. The cross He *must* do, or He is no Christ at all, but a false Christ, giving false hope - a hope for this world and life only. And so Jesus teaches . . . about the cross. Jesus heals . . . to foreshadow the great healing of His resurrection. Jesus drives out demons because His death and resurrection is going to drive out satan and his demons forever. All Jesus does is because He is going to the cross. Because **the only good Christ is a dead Christ**.

But Jesus then goes on to talk about those who come after Him, those who follow Him. And if it is only by dying that Jesus is the Christ, then it is also only by dying that a person is a Christian, a little Christ. Not doing good things but dying makes Jesus the Christ, and not doing good things but dying makes a person a Christian.

And so Jesus says: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*. And everyone who heard that, everyone standing there that day, knew what that meant; knew what it meant to take up a cross. Because in the first century, if you saw someone walking down the street with a cross on their back, it meant only one thing: *that person would soon be dead*.

And then Jesus doubles down on that, saying: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it*. Which is to say that if you drop your cross and run and think you'll be able to save yourself by doing so, you're actually losing your life. *You want to save your life?* Lose it. Lose it for my sake, Jesus says. Lose it like me, and you'll have a new life that not even death will be able to end. Or in other words, **the only good Christian is a dead Christian**. There's no other way. There's nothing else you can give in return for your life. No amount of good you can do can make up for the amount of sin you have - the sin you've done and the sin that you inherited. The only way to live is to die and be raised to a new life.

Which is why we bring our children here - **to die**. And it's why *we* come here - **to die**. Not to learn how to be better, but **to die**. To have the cross of Christ applied to us, and then to also be raised with Him to a new life. A new life reconciled to God, justified by Jesus' blood, and set free from sin and death. And such a life is true life. A life we can live with confidence and without fear. If we try to avoid all this and save our life some other way, *you will lose it*, along with your confidence and your hope. You may gain the world, but you will lose your life. **The only good Christian is a dead Christian.**

And where you die, and where you rise with Christ to a new life, is in **Baptism**. That's what Paul goes on to explain in the next chapter of Romans - the chapter after the one we heard from today. That's what Baptism is all about. Dying and rising with Christ to a new life. That is where the cross of Christ is applied to us. Not just *any* cross, but His cross; a *saving* cross. We go into the water as sinners, we come out as Christians. Little Christs.

And then for all the sin we continue to do - cuz we do! The sin we fall into or climb aboard or welcome into our hearts during the week, we come and return to our Baptism in Confession and Absolution. Not being re-baptized, but drowning our sin in those waters again, and receiving the forgiveness promised us there. But not just here and not just on Sunday, but every day as we pray the Lord's Prayer: *and forgive us our trespasses*, and He does. And as we ask one another for forgiveness, and receive it. In all these ways we take up our cross and die. We don't justify our sin, excuse it, explain it, or rationalize it, and so try to avoid the cross - we nail it, we confess it, and die; that dying with Christ we also rise with Him, we are also raised by Him, in forgiveness, to a new life.

And so the Christian life is one of constant dying and rising. Dying to sin, dying to ourselves, and rising with Christ. **The only good Christian is a dead Christian.**

That, in fact, is what made Abram and Sarai - renamed Abraham and Sarah - perfect for God. They were dead. Abram was 99 years old and Sarai was 89 and barren. There weren't any kids coming from that marriage or from that womb. And so in the verses right after the ones we heard today from Genesis, Abraham makes a suggestion; he's got an idea: let Ishmael be my heir, God (17:18)! That'll work! But the words spoken to Peter could have been spoken here as well: Abraham, *you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man*. You're dead and that makes you perfect for God. By this time next year, the gift of a son, the gift of new life, will be given to you and Sarah (17:21).

This Peter and the others still had to learn. And so Jesus *strictly charged them to tell no one about him*. Don't preach of Him as the Christ . . . yet. You don't understand yet, that **the only good Christ is a dead Christ**. But you will. And then you'll understand this as well: that **the only good Christian is a dead Christian**. Because we have a God who gives life to the dead.

And you know what dead men who have been raised from the dead do? They rejoice. They have true joy. Lasting joy. Three times Paul used that word today. He said *we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, we rejoice in our sufferings, and we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* We rejoice in our words, we rejoice in our deeds, we rejoice in our lives. Because we've been given the gift of a new life in Him. Because *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* The Spirit of love, joy, and peace. The Spirit of patience, kindness, and goodness. The Spirit of faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Spirit who works all good in us, all holiness, and keeps us in Jesus and His life.

And all this through Jesus' death and resurrection. All this through your own death and resurrection with Him. There is no other way.

For He is the Christ and you are His Christians. Come, let us die with Him, that we may also rise, rejoice, and live with Him (2 Timothy 2:11).

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.