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Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Bad Choices, Good Decisions”

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 15:25-35; Philemon 1-21

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

What was the last bad choice you made?

Maybe it was what you ate for breakfast this morning that isn't agreeing with you now. Or maybe it was skipping breakfast and now you regret that decision. Or maybe it was that impulse buy you made and now you're having buyers remorse. Or maybe it was that you agreed to do something that you really don't want to do but now you have to go through with it.

Most of the time, when we make a bad decision, we may regret the decision we made, but in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter all that much. We get over it. We'll make a better decision next time. We'll learn from our mistakes, our bad choices. *Hopefully* we will, anyway.

But some bad choices have a more lasting effect.

I learned just last week of a young man, the son of a friend of mine, who - just a little over a month ago now, in an effort to get a better picture of a waterfall - got too close to the edge and fell to his death. That was a bad decision he can't get back. Or something that we often hear in the news: the person who had a few too many to drink, got behind the wheel of his car anyway, and in a car crash killed or maimed someone. A bad decision that can't be taken back.

So what of the decisions we make concerning God? How would you categorize them? Are they decisions of little consequence or of great consequence? And however you answered that question, does your life and the decisions you make on a daily basis match up with that answer?

So maybe we think that not going to church every Sunday, not reading the Scriptures, not praying, not living according to God's Word and will isn't really that big a deal - in the category of what you had for breakfast this morning . . . But is that true? Or are those decisions a bigger deal than we think or know? What if you knew that this Sunday was

going to be the last chance you had to be at church and to have the Lord's Supper? Would that change your decision?

Think about this, too: can lots of small bad decisions add up and eventually end up in one really big bad decision? Can not going to church every Sunday, not reading the Scriptures, not praying, and not living according to God's Word and will end up with the loss of your faith? If so, those really aren't little things at all, are they? And in reality, are more like us creeping closer and closer to the edge of the precipice, and one more step . . .

One of the responsibilities of fathers and mothers is to teach their children how to make good choices, good decisions. To think about the future. To be aware that decisions made now, though they may seem small and insignificant, may have serious consequences later. It's an important job, and not an easy one.

Today we heard in the Old Testament reading of Moses doing that with Israel. He is about to die. Israel is on the border of the Promised Land for the second time. The first time, they made a bad decision and did not go in, and it cost them a whole generation of people and forty years in the wilderness. Now they're back, and father Moses is trying to teach his children to make a better decision this time. The book of Deuteronomy is Moses going through the history of Israel - the good, the bad, and the ugly - and there was a lot of ugly! Israel had made a lot of really bad decisions, some of which had severe and lasting consequences. But now, he says, ***choose life!*** Choose life by walking in the ways of the Lord and worshiping Him alone. Have no other gods. Don't fear, love, or trust the things of this world more than Him. For only in the Lord is good and blessing and life.

And Jesus is doing the same thing in the words of the Holy Gospel that we heard today. ***Count the cost***, He says, of following Him. Which are not words meant to keep or discourage you from doing that! But to make you think: What is important to me? And why? Is that what really matters? Am I going to be happy about this decision twenty years from now when my situation changes? Questions which then lead to this question as well: *What is the cost of not following Jesus?*

And Jesus uses two examples: of building and fighting, so let's stick with those.

Lots of people are busy building - building their lives, building their careers, fulfilling their dreams, and like a tower, that takes a lot of work. But, Jesus asks, are you able to complete it? What if you fall short of your dreams, what then? What if your career gets short-circuited, what then? And when it comes to your life, are you able to construct a life that will last forever, even overcoming death? How much are your dreams, your career, your life going to cost you? Is it worth it? *Is that a good decision?*

Then Jesus speaks of fighting which, for Christians, would translate into fighting evil.

Are you able, on your own, to do so? Do you know the size of the enemy coming against you? Do you know their strength, their methods, their craftiness? Do you think you're able to withstand the assaults of the evil one coming against you? *Is that a good decision?*

Those are bad choices. Trying to go through this life by yourself, on your own. Trying to build your own life and future. Trying to fight your own battle. But how often do we make those choices? Or how often do we make not an all at once, big decision about that, but lots of small decisions about those things that add up to a big deal. That are like creeping closer and closer to the edge of that precipice? We didn't mean to fall off!

So it's not that Jesus doesn't want everyone to follow Him - He certainly does! But if you love your family more than Him, then if you have to choose between something your family wants or what is God's will, that's going to lead you to make a bad choice. Or if you really want something for your life, or you're most concerned with advancing your career, or think you can go it alone for a while and I'll worry about Jesus later . . . you're going to make bad choices. Choices that might not seem like a big deal now . . . *but maybe they are?*

So, Jesus says, ***whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*** That's a pretty strong statement. But think of it this way: **in order to pick up the cross you have to put down whatever else it is you're carrying**; whatever else it is you're clinging to; whatever else it is you're putting before Jesus in this world and life. It's not that Jesus doesn't want you to love your family - He does! The word for *hate* there doesn't mean the emotional, *I hate you*, kind of thing; it means to put them before Jesus. It means to make decisions to please them even if those decisions displease God. If you're doing that, things aren't right, are they?

So to ***bear your own cross***, to pick up the cross, is to put down *your* way of doing things, *your* way of thinking, what *you* think is most important and that you cannot live without, **and live by way of the cross.**

Now that's an odd statement and one that really doesn't make any sense! To **live by way of the cross**. Because crosses were meant and designed to kill, not give life! But there is, as you know, one cross that does, in fact, give life. Not because of the cross, but because of the one who hung on it, and after being killed, rose to life again. The one who took your sin, all your bad and wrong decisions and actions and words and desires, took them to that cross and had them all crucified with Him there. To set you free from them so that you can live. Not a life of regrets and second guessing about the past, but looking forward to a glorious future with the forgiveness of your sins. A future not of *your* making, but of His making.

Jesus knew that cost. He knew when He came into this world that He would leave it in

this most horrible and gruesome way. But He knew it would be for you. To bear your sin and guilt so you wouldn't have to. To die that you might live. So as great as it was, as steep as it was, Jesus paid that cost. His blood for your forgiveness. His death for your life. His condemnation for your freedom. And then rising from the dead, the cost paid in full, you too rise from being dead in your trespasses and sins to a new life.

So to take up your own cross, to put down what you are carrying, to live that new life . . . *how do you do that?* Where exactly is that cross? Well it is where Jesus put it for you: **in the font**. That's where you die and rise with Jesus. So for us, to take up our cross and put down what we are carrying is to repent of our sins, remember that *I am baptized*, and receive that forgiveness and new life Jesus has for me and promised me and gives me. And not just to repent of our sins here, though that's important. But I would say, that's the easy part. But that repenting of our sins here, we also learn to repent of our sins *out there*, to repent to one another. Which is hard. But again, important. And that with the forgiveness we receive here, to also forgive one another.

So to take up your cross is to die to yourself, to you being your own god, to you being number one, and to live a new life. That new life is a gift that cost a great deal, even more than you can imagine! But that was bought for you and given to you. Think of the gift you'd most like to have in this world, and it doesn't even begin to come close to this one.

But good doesn't mean easy, and it won't be easy. Crosses never were and never will be. We heard the story of Philemon and Onesimus today. Onesimus the runaway slave who stole from his master, Philemon. While away, on the lam, Onesimus is baptized. He receives a new life. He dies and rises with Jesus. But that was the easy part. Now, Paul says, you must go back. Put down your freedom and go back and repent. And Paul sends this letter with Onesimus to tell Philemon the same thing! Put down your anger, your right for revenge, and forgive Onesimus. Both of you, live a new way! The way of love and forgiveness. The way of laying down your old life because you've been given a new one. For your old life isn't going anywhere and is going to end. But your new life you will live forever.

And here's the thing: whatever you put down in this life to take up the cross, you get back even more than you gave up. Maybe you don't see it or realize it at first, but ask some old Christians, some who've been at this for a long time, who've been through the trenches and for whom life hasn't been easy - and they'll tell you. For when everything else in this world and life go away - your sight, your hearing, your strength, your popularity, your health, your status, your followers - you'll still have Jesus in the end. He's the one who isn't going anywhere. And He's here for you today, with His forgiveness and life, and here with His Body and Blood to feed your new life. Time spent here, in His Word, in prayer, and receiving His Body and Blood - those are decisions you will never regret. And decisions that will impact the rest of your life, too - in good ways. And following Jesus through life to death now, we will follow Him through death to life

forever.

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.