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Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Son’s Reward”

Text: Matthew 10:34-42; Jeremiah 28:5-9

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

Tough words we heard today! But Jesus doesn’t hate families. They were His idea! In the beginning, when God created all things, He didn’t just create a million individuals and scatter them about the earth. He created a man and a woman joined in marriage and said: make a family. Have children. And they did.

But what Jesus *does* hate is idols. False gods. Which by catechetical definition is anything or anyone in this world that we fear, love, or trust more than God. And that can include the family. Now families are good. We thank God for families, even when they are broken, difficult, or a struggle. He still blesses us through them. But if family comes before God, that’s not good. If we sacrifice God for family - because we don’t want to make waves, or because we’re trying to make our family like a Norman Rockwell portrait - we’ve erred. We’ve sinned. We need to repent.

But it’s not just that. Sometimes bringing God into our families will cause division. If someone in the family - a parent or a child - is going against the truth of God’s Word, or living at variance with God’s truth, standing on God’s Word can cause friction or division. For the sake of peace, maybe we remain silent. But is gaining earthly peace for a time worth sacrificing heavenly peace for eternity? That’s not what Jesus wants. But sin infects all things. Us, our families, our relationships. Temptations abound. Life isn’t easy. We shouldn’t expect it to be.

That’s what Jesus has been teaching His disciples as He sends them out. This isn’t going to be easy. He doesn’t blow smoke at them, sugar-coat it, make it sound good. What they’re doing is good, but not easy. And for us, too. Jesus teaches us with hard sayings. And remember when you were in school? (And some of you still are!) It’s not the easy teachers you learn the most from, but the tough ones. The ones you don’t like. So you won’t find these words of Jesus that we heard today on any coffee mugs or little wooden signs to hang in your house and put on your desk! Nevertheless, we need to hear them. And we’ll be the better for them.

But not just us. The people in Jeremiah’s day had this problem as well. There were many prophets in Jeremiah’s day. The problem was that the large majority of them - almost all

of them, in fact, except a very few - were false prophets. Prophesying not the Word of the Lord, but the thoughts and imaginations of their own minds, or saying what the king and the people wanted to hear. This made them very popular, but not very good. And certainly displeasing in the sight of God. They were misleading the people into false belief, security in their sin, and away from the one true God and His gifts.

The problem with that is that if you don't know you have a problem, you won't seek a solution. If you don't think you have a drinking problem, or a drug problem, or a pornography problem, or an anger problem, or a stealing problem, or whatever other problems you may have, you'll keep right on doing what you're doing. And you *still* might, even if you know you have a problem! Because it's easier than changing, than getting help. But when you know you have a problem and you know you need help, and to continue this way just makes things worse, changing is hard, but good in the end. To get the help you need. And you and me, we need help.

So Jesus wouldn't be a prophet like in Jeremiah's day. So while His words that we heard today are difficult and challenging, we can give thanks that He speaks them - that Jesus will not tell us what we want to hear, but instead expose our sin, our idolatry, our tendency to take the easy way instead of the right way, the selfish way instead of the good way. So that we'll repent and seek the help we need, from Him. That we not falsely believe that everything is okay, or that the problem is him or her or them - but I am the problem. And again, turn to Jesus for the forgiveness, life, help, and saving we need.

And that's the message the disciples would preach, and be rejected for it. They would heal - that's great! They would cast out unclean spirits - that's cool! They would preach repentance - whoa! Don't go there! Stay in your lane! But, Jesus is telling them, that is your lane. When you are sick you know you needing healing. Those with unclean spirits need cleansing. And those with sin need forgiveness. Diagnose the problem, then apply the healing. You can stay home, not go to the doctor, and die. You can do that. But Dr. Jesus doesn't want that for you. He wants you to live. Now, and forever. So He sends prophets, He sends apostles, He sends preachers.

And through them He comes, as, He says, with a sword. Or maybe to continue with the doctor's analogy here, with a scalpel. Now in the wrong hands, like in the hands of a false prophet or false teacher, contradicting the Word of the Lord, that can do a lot of damage, and can kill. But in the right hands, the hands of a skilled surgeon, the same sword, or scalpel, can heal and do a world of good. And the sword Jesus brings is the sword of His Spirit, the sword of His Word. To expose our sin and restore us to health. Spiritual health. In Him.

But to do that, Jesus didn't just come with the sword, He had it come down on Him. For He said today, ***whoever does not take his cross and follow me . . .*** Follow Him who is bearing HIS cross. Who took up His cross for you, that you might live. Who took up His

cross to pay for your sin, to win your forgiveness. The crosses we bear in life are nothing compared to that. And yet are we even unwilling to bear them? The cross of a sick or struggling spouse. The cross of a difficult co-worker. The cross of a wayward child. The cross of being inconvenienced to help someone else. The cross of sacrificing myself for someone else. It's easy to choose easy instead, isn't it? But ***whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life*** - refuses the cross, chooses the easy way - ***will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake*** - taking up his cross, laying down his life for others - ***will find it***.

This is a critical game of Lost and Found, which is really no game at all. And bottom line: we lost. We are ***not worthy*** of Jesus.

But once you know that diagnosis, the problem you have, the sin-sickness, then comes the solution, the cure. Jesus next speaks not of condemnation, but of reward. The reward for receiving a prophet - one who speaks the Word of God - and a righteous person - one who believes the Word of God. Surely these would be good rewards. ***But there is one even better. Whoever receives you*** (the disciples He is sending to preach His Word) ***receives me***, Jesus says, ***and whoever receives me receives him who sent me***. On our own, we are unworthy, and it's not even close. But when we who are unworthy, who are sinners, receive and believe the preaching of Jesus, ***we receive Him and His reward***. And we receive the one who sent Him: the Father. We become children of God, and we get a family here - a family of faith.

***So by grace*** - for the Son of God coming into our world and laying down His life for is ***pure*** grace! ***And by faith*** - believing in Him who came and did this for you - you receive Him and His reward, what He earned and won. Namely, the forgiveness of all your sin, a place in the royal family, and a kingdom that will have no end. That's why we are baptized and have our children baptized, to receive this gift. That's why we confess our sin, to receive this gift. That's why we come and eat the Body and drink the Blood of Jesus, to receive this gift. Not because we're worthy, but because we're not. Because we need this gift. This gift we could never get on our own, but which is here for you - by grace, through faith.

That's the message we need to hear. You don't need to come here to hear about making peace with the world. We tend to want to do that anyway and make our life easier. But making peace with a sinful world means believing what they believe, saying what they say, and doing what they do, and in the end, losing your life. Instead, we hear of the peace with God Jesus has made for us. And with this peace, we believe the Word of Jesus, say what He said, and do what He did. And so ***find*** our life. Not an easy life - it's a life under the cross. But while not easy, it ***is*** good and eternal.

And then this little line Jesus adds: ***And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his***

*reward*. Now the world's not going to notice this; not think it a big deal. Might even think it foolish and not worth its time. One of these little ones - *micros*, in the Greek. But here Jesus is saying . . . when you're a father or mother caring for your child, a little one, *He notices*. And who are the others in our world today who could be considered "little ones" - ones that get overlooked, ones the world says don't matter, ones who just get in the way? The poor, the lonely, the aged, the handicapped, the outcast, who else? When you care for them, when you do as Jesus did, when you take up your cross and lay down your life for them, *Jesus notices*. And no matter what you give up, you receive even more. For you ***will by no means lose your reward***. Your reward, which is His reward, given to you.

So some tough words from Jesus today! But some good ones, too. Words of truth. Words of life. Words we need. So come and receive not a prophet or a righteous person, but the Son of God Himself, His Body and Blood, and so receive the Son of God's reward: everlasting peace, in an everlasting kingdom, with your everlasting Father. And whatever else you need beyond that, He will provide. For He gives His little ones a cup of cold water, too.

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.