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Pentecost 14

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Searching For Life”

Text: Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

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

God created you to have life. A full and abundant life. A large and meaningful life. Everything about creation was about life. A place for life. Food for life. Adam and Eve coming together in marriage for life. Even the tree in the Garden that God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of it, that would bring death if they did, even this was for life. So that Adam and Eve could live a life of love towards God. That by not eating of this tree, they could show their love toward God and their trust in His Word.

Of course, things are different now. Because Adam and Eve ate of that tree and brought sin and death into this world of life. But what is not different is that God still wants you to have life. A full and abundant life. A large and meaningful life. **It’s just that we don’t know how anymore.** Oh, we think we do! But like Adam and Eve, we’re looking in the wrong places, listening to the wrong words, chasing the wrong things. So when we hear words of life, words that give life, they sound alien, foreign, and even wrong to our ears. Like someone speaking a language we do not know.

So it was for Peter. Jesus speaks to Him words of life, but he cannot understand them. He knows, as we heard last week, that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God*. The Son of the *life-giving* God. Got that. But when Jesus now, as we heard today, talks about how that life will be given once again to Peter and all the world, things break down. So when Jesus says ***that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised***, Peter says **no**. In fact, more than that - Peter, confident from his previous correct answer, is sure that he is also correct now. So he uses the most emphatic **no** he can speak! *No way, no how, never ever, absolutely not* shall this happen to you. This is not how a living God, a life-giving God works. If this was a test, Peter was sure he aced it!

So imagine his surprise when he gets the test back with a back fat **F** on it! In thick, dark red! Because what else can it be when Jesus calls you satan than a profound fail. ***Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*** You are not thinking or speaking like God. For this is how God gives life. The death of His Son for the life of the world. It **must** be so. There is no other way. Jesus will die for our sins so that He can break open death and

the grave and we can have life again.

But that's only step one. Step one is the giving of life. In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve and gave them life, and through your Baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, you have been born again from above and given a new life. Now comes *the living* of that life. And here is where we get confused . . . and look in the wrong places, and listen to the wrong words, and chase after the wrong things. Jesus tells us of life, and the living of this life, *but it doesn't sound quite right. If anyone would come after me - to life! - let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Now . . . to deny yourself, to take up a cross, to lose your life . . . that's not to have a full and abundant life; a large and meaningful life! Those things take life away from you! Or so we think. And so satan hisses. Really living is when you do not deny yourself, but have what you want! Freedom is not life under a cross, but life free from constraints. And whatever threatens your life or happiness - that is what you must lose so you can live. Fulfillment comes from indulgence. That the catechesis of the world. And so it is in our world today. People chasing and reaching out for and taking what they think is life and will give them life - that big, ripe fruit that satan is more than happy to provide. *What is it for you?* Because yes, we do those things, too.

And people are more unhappy than ever. It's not working. Life isn't working! Adam and Eve found that out. What they reached out and ate didn't improve life or give life, but made them ashamed, naked, and divided against one another. They hid from God. Their life was gone. And today? . . . I thought I'd be happy if I just did this, or became that. The more I get, the more I want. People focused on themselves and fulfilling their desires are lonelier than ever. People aren't just overdosing on opioids, there's other kinds of overdoses, too. Like, some need the rush of the Amazon truck stopping at their house everyday! But then they can't pay their bills either. People aren't comfortable in their own bodies. And then a wildfire or a hurricane can take everything away so quickly. Life? A full and abundant life? A large and meaningful life? That would be nice. **But I don't know how.**

You see, there's more to the Christian life - the life God has for you - than listening to the world during the week and doing *that*, and then repenting of doing *that* and listening to God on Sunday. How does my life become His life? How does my life become full and abundant, large and meaningful again? I think that's what people want. That's what you want. It's just that we're looking in the wrong places, listening to the wrong words, and reaching for the wrong fruit.

So maybe Jesus was on to something. Maybe His words to Peter are worth reconsidering, and even trying. That the way to life, a full and abundant life, a large and meaningful life,

is through death. That only in losing my life will I find it. That instead of “No Lord,” or “But Lord,” or “What if, Lord?” or “I need that, Lord!” our life is “Yes Lord.”

What does such a life look like? St. Paul listed quite a few things for us today. And to be honest, it's quite a staggering list! I won't go through it all, but some of the highlights? Patience in tribulation. Bless those who persecute you. Feed and give drink to your enemy. Associate with the lowly. Don't avenge yourself. Overcome evil with good, and more. And what all these things have in common is living a life of love and service toward others. That we stop living for ourselves and start living for others. Might that be the *transformation of our mind* that we heard last week, that Paul speaks of in the verses right before the ones we heard today? That will move us back to life - the life we want and the life we need?

At first, it seems **no**, right? That to stop living for myself and start living a life of love and service toward others means less life for me and more for them! But maybe not. Maybe that's exactly what we need. Maybe that knocks us off our self-appointed god-throne and lets God be God in my life again. For such a life is like life in the beginning again, isn't it? **For it is a life which relies on God for everything.** For a life of love and service toward others is a life of faith in God, that not me but He will provide what I need, when I need it, and how I need it. And that He can do it better than me anyway.

That's hard, though, isn't it? Frightening, maybe. That's why we keep not doing it! But if what we're doing isn't working, maybe it's true what Jesus said, maybe this is what we see in our world, and maybe in your own life today: ***What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?*** That means gaining the whole world - the riches of the whole world, the honor and admiration of the whole world, the service of the whole world, the power of the whole world - none of that is life. And none of that can give you life. Only Jesus can give life. And that's the very thing He wants to do, and give. That's why He came. That's why He gave His life. To give you life. A full and abundant life. A large and meaningful life.

Now, we're not told what Peter said in response to these words from Jesus. Stunned silence, I guess. A “this doesn't compute” silence. But interestingly, the very next story Matthew tells us is **Jesus' transfiguration**. When six days later, Jesus takes Peter, along with James and John, up a mountain and shows them . . . what? Life. His life. His glory. What He wants for them! What He has come to provide them. And Peter is excited! Remember the story? He wants to stay! Of course he does. But again, no Peter. This life is for you, but it can't come here. Life now comes through death. Through Jesus' cross and tomb. So back down the mountain they go. And very soon, now, to Jerusalem. For Jesus to die. For Peter, for you, and for me. And for Jesus to rise. For Peter, for you, and for me. That our end not be death and the grave, but life in glory, with Jesus, Moses, Elijah, the angels, and the Father. *Our Father.*

So that's why we come here every Sunday. Not that we listen to the world during the week and do *that*, and then repent of doing *that* and listen to God on Sunday. We come here to get a glimpse of Jesus' glory and life. And even more - **to receive it**. To receive not only the forgiveness we need but the life we need. The life that we don't, then, leave here, but take with us. A life of love and service, which looks to our Father and trusts Him for all we need. And such a life of love and service starts with those nearest and dearest to you, your family. Sometimes those are the people we treat the worst! But then you receive their love and service, and forgiveness. Jesus blessing you through them. How great is that? And then not only family, but your church family, and then friends, neighbors, co-workers, classmates - people in all the vocations God has given you. Places where you love and serve not to win your Father's favor and love, but because you already have it.

And then maybe you will find in that, life. The life you've been looking for all along, just looking in the wrong places, listening to the wrong words, and chasing the wrong things. Not that it will be easy! Life in this sinful world isn't ever going to be that. But just maybe a full and abundant life, a large and meaningful life is when you have a life that's bigger than just you, and serving you, and focused on you! Maybe serving others is just what we need.

Of course, there's no maybe about it at all, is there? It's what Jesus has said. It's what Jesus has done. It's what Jesus gives to you. He who laid down His life for you. He who gives you His life here in His Body and Blood. He who baptized you and made you His child, with all the great and precious promises that go with that. That's life. A full and abundant life. A large and meaningful life. And now your life. Your life to live now, and your life to live 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.