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Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Don’t Amputate! Medicate!”  
Text: Matthew 18:1-20

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

Is amputation really the way to go?

During (and, I imagine, up to) the time of the Civil War, yes, it was. During the Civil War, if you were shot or wounded, it is likely you would have a limb amputated. There were over 60,000 amputations performed during that war - three-quarters of all the surgeries performed were amputations. Accounts from that time often talk about the piles of limbs that were seen outside the hospitals. For better to lose an arm or a leg, than for your whole body to perish.

Amputations are still done today, for gangrene or other diseases that will spread and consume your body. We see it also with many of the veterans who have returned from wars in the Middle East. But modern medicine has made this practice far less necessary.

Jesus talks about amputation today. *Better to lose an arm, leg, or eye than that your whole body be lost to the hell of fire.* And He says that because He knows - although we don’t often know, or acknowledge - that we’re in a war. Against General Satan and his army of evil. And make no mistake, he is gunning for you. He wants your life. He wants you to be ***thrown into the hell of fire*** with him. That’s why we call the Church on earth today the Church Militant. We’re in a struggle against sin and evil. And it is truly a world war. A war to end all wars. A fight to the finish. Satan is not going to give up; he’s going to fight to the bitter end. And therefore so must we.

But a tactic Satan uses to his great advantage is to lull us to sleep. No major battles in your life lately, so you can take it easy. The sins that you do . . . they’re not amputatable wounds! Just little things, little scratches. Bumps and bruises. They’ll heal, won’t they? You don’t have to worry about them! . . . Until you do. Until before you know it, that sin has grown and spread. That bitterness and resentment, that greed or pride, that sexual sin or coveting, that uncaring withdrawal or rebellion has grown and spread and taken over your life. And then what?

And then what if *your* sin has caused *others* to sin as well? In a war, one soldier taking it easy and letting down his guard can cause another to, until the enemy is upon them. And

sin can spread, too. Among friends, among families, among churches. Bad examples followed. If everybody's doing it, then why can't I? Better then, Jesus says, ***to have a great millstone fastened around [your] neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.***

Jesus takes this sin-stuff seriously. As He should. As we should. He knows how serious it is, even if we don't always. That's why in catechesis, the first thing to learn is the danger of the battle going on not just *around* us, but in us. The battle that is being waged for you, for your soul. The battle against sin and evil that the Ten Commandments expose. That these wounds are serious. That these wounds are far more frequent than we think. And that if left untreated, are deadly.

But Jesus doesn't want any amputations! They may be better than the alternative, and sometimes churches are forced to excommunicate, rather than let sin reign within them. But that's not what Jesus wants. He doesn't want even one member of His Body, the Church, lost. ***The Son of Man***, he says, ***came to save the lost.*** So if even one of His sheep, one of His lambs, goes astray, He cares. He acts. He goes after that one, even leaving the ninety-nine on the mountain to search. Not because He doesn't care about the ninety-nine, but because He cares *so much* about the one. About you. He is obsessed. He is single-minded. For each and every one.

And He wants us to be as well. To not just be in His flock - which you are - but to live in His image. Be like Him. That renewal He has begun in you, through His Spirit, given to you in the Word, in the Word combined with the water of Baptism, in Absolution, and in His Supper. And I'd like to say I'm like that, that I live like that, and I'm sure you, too. But in this war, I see a lot of amputations. People we don't get along with? Cut them off! Spouses in a difficult marriage? Cut them off! Divorce them. Friends who hurt us? That neighbor who oversteps, that person we disagree with? Cut them off! And look around. Look at the piles of people who've been amputated and thrown out into the pile. A pile that in our world today seems to keep getting larger. And maybe you've been one of them, cut off by another.

But as modern medicine has made this procedure far less necessary, so, too, the great physician of body and soul has medicine for us. Medicine that can heal wounded souls, heal friendships and relationships, families and marriages. Medicine doesn't always taste good, and this medicine we might not want to take either! But it is what we need. **The medicine of forgiveness.**

So if your brother or sister, your friend or neighbor, your spouse or child, your parent or the person sitting in the pew next to you sins against you, Jesus says, ***don't just cut them off.*** Don't go for the amputation! Reach for the medicine first. ***Go and tell him his fault. And if he listens to you, you have gained him back.*** If he listens to you . . . which means you have the chance to apply the medicine - ***you get to forgive!*** And implied there also is that if she comes to you, you listen. She cared enough about you to search you out, so

you care enough about her to listen, and to repent. And then the medicine is applied: *I forgive you.*

But not just that. Sometimes searches aren't so easy, right? We hear on the news when hikers get lost in the woods, the search teams don't just go out once or for a couple of hours, but for days. They don't want to give up. And Jesus says the same thing. Don't give up! If he refuses to listen, keep searching with a couple of others. Even with the whole church. There are wounds that need healing. There are hurts that need medicine. We don't want to amputate, or be amputated, or have someone amputate themselves and cut themselves off from the church, from Christ! We have this wonderful medicine of forgiveness. That can heal far more than we think.

*And how much is that?* **This medicine of forgiveness can even raise the dead.** Those dead in their trespasses and sins now, and those quite literally dead who will be raised to life again on the last day. **It can re-attach amputated limbs**, restoring those who have been cut off, or have amputated themselves. **It can make us whole again.** Friendships, marriages, churches, ***wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus.*** Because where Jesus' name is, there is He. And where He is, there is life and forgiveness - the life and medicine we need. The medicine that comes from the tree of the cross.

For there on the cross, Jesus took all the poison, all the sin, all the gangrene and disease of sin into Himself and let it kill Him take His life, that in so doing, He provide the antidote to it all - forgiveness. He was the one amputated - from His people, from His own Father, that we could be healed and restored. And when He rose from the dead, He made all things new again. One again, whole again, in Himself. And to heal the divisions our sin has caused - between God and sinners, between Jew and Gentiles, between brothers and sisters in Christ.

And how good does it feel when after you've been sick you get better? When the throbbing, the pain, the fever, the chills, whatever it is - finally you wake up one morning and it's gone! That's what the resurrection will be like - when all the sickness and disease of our sin is finally, and once and for all, gone forever! But it happens, too, even now. When those doubts and fears, those hurts and wounds, that guilt and those regrets, are confessed and forgiven. Medicine for the sin-sick soul. How good it feels when what divides and is divided, divides no more.

Sadly, that's not going to be 100% in this world and life. Not until the resurrection on the Last Day. We're going to be in the Church Militant until the end. There's always going to be need of this medicine. For us to give and for us to receive. The good news is that it will never run out. The supply from the cross is boundless.

*And in this* is the greatness of the kingdom of heaven. To not just be like a child, but to be like the child - the Son of God. To humble ourselves in confession and repentance. To

humble ourselves and forgive and not demand pay back! To humble ourselves to receive the forgiveness of others and not try to fix it or earn it ourselves. That is greatness because it is all about Jesus. Jesus *for you*.

So come now and receive the medicine of His Body and Blood, given and shed on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. Herb and Maria will be receiving that with us for the first time today, and we are so glad you are here. That our Lord has brought you here to us and is making you one with us in this fellowship. Forgive us when we sin against you. Receive our forgiveness when you sin against us. As together, we look forward to that day when all in Christ Jesus are raised to life everlasting and there is no more medicine! Only life. Only joy. Only oneness. Only Jesus.

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.