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Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“From the Garbage Heap to the Kingdom of God”
Text: Matthew 21:33-46; Philippians 3:4b-14

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

Rubbish. Trash. Garbage. That smelly, soupy, disgusting juice that collects at the bottom of your garbage can. That's what St. Paul calls everything he has in this world compared to Christ. His position, his esteem, his accomplishments, his knowledge, his righteousness. All of that, he says, is nothing, worthless, compared to Christ.

How different the servants in the vineyard and *their* thinking in the parable Jesus told today. They want to hold onto what they have in this world and try to get more, even if it means beating, stoning, and killing others. Even if it means killing the son of the man who owns the vineyard! This is what they want! And they'll do whatever they have to do to have it and keep it.

Two very different attitudes towards the world and the things of the world. Paul said he'd throw away everything except for Christ. The servants would throw away Christ to keep everything else. He was the stone they rejected, threw out with the garbage, crucified. Because they couldn't build their kingdom on Him. So they had no use for Him.

But when God looks for a cornerstone on which to build His Church, where does He find it? In the garbage. They said it couldn't be done, build anything on Him. And yet God did. A Church that has endured for thousands of years. And a Church, in fact, that will last for eternity.

But let's think about that a little, and not rush right past that . . . We know how Christ was rejected *then* . . . How is Christ rejected *today*? How are people today saying *today*, like the builders were saying *then*: *You can't build a Church on that!* You can't build a Church on the Bible being the infallible, inerrant Word of God. People don't believe that anymore. *You can't build a Church on that.* You can't build a Church believing that God created everything. You can't build a Church on sexual abstinence until marriage, only two sexes, marriage only between a man and a woman, and marriage for life. Nobody does that anymore. *You can't build a Church on that.* You can't build a Church with a masculine God, only male pastors, and closed communion. You can't build a Church by talking about sin and forgiveness - you have to talk about what people have to do to have a better life. You can't build a Church by insisting on one truth and not compromising. It

can't be done. You can't build a Church like that. And there's more, I'm sure.

But when you throw all those things out, you are throwing out the teachings of Jesus. And when you throw out the teachings of Jesus, you are throwing away Jesus Himself. And trying to get the vineyard for yourself, and your kingdom, and how you want things to be. That what the chief priests and the Pharisees were doing. They had their truth, they had their way, they had their kingdom, they had their way of doing things, and when Jesus and His teaching challenged that, He had to go.

And so it has been with some, maybe many, ever since. But here's the thing: if you're not built on Christ as the cornerstone, then you will either trip and fall over Him or be crushed by Him. All other kingdoms cannot last. *Only His can.* For death and decay, sooner or later, destroys everything. Only Jesus has defeated death and decay in His resurrection from the dead. So only His kingdom will last.

So it's worth thinking about how we might be like those servants in the vineyard, what we might be clinging to in this world and life that's not really worth clinging to! And in clinging to it, throwing away what is far more valuable. And lasting. Maybe we don't mean to. Maybe we don't even know we are. Maybe we think we can hang onto the world with one hand and Christ with the other! But how long do you think that will last?

And then think about this, too: The world and its things that you're hanging on to, really have no use for you. Oh, maybe you get praise for a bit, some success, make a name for yourself. But how long does it last? How long until the world moves on? And you find *yourself* thrown out in the garbage, just as Christ was. Just think about all the people in this very neighborhood in the two million dollar homes you drive past as you leave church today - how many of them will be remembered 50 years from now? Any?

But the news isn't all bad . . . For just as God found His cornerstone in the garbage that no one else wanted, so He finds His children there, too. Remember last week? Jesus talked about the tax collectors and prostitutes - the refuse of society - entering the kingdom of heaven before the chief priests and the Pharisees. Jesus said the first will be last and the last first. Think of all the people in the Bible the world had no use for, and yet God chose them, used them, and raised them up. To give the vineyard to them. Not because they deserve it, but by grace. As a gift. Not because of who they are, but because of who He is.

And so it is. The Church may not look successful as the world defines success, but every time a sinner is baptized, it is a success. Jesus is building His Church. Every time a sinner repents and is absolved, it is a success. Jesus is building His Church. Every time a dying person receives hope in the Gospel, it is a success. Jesus is building His Church. Every time you speak an unpopular truth in love, it is a success. Every time you are fed by Jesus with His Body and Blood, it is a success. Jesus is building His Church. A Church full of

sinner, built on Him. A Church full of people the world looked at and said: naaaah! A Church full of people the world will not remember a few years after we die, but a Church full of people Jesus will never forget. For you have been cemented into Him and His life. *Engraved on the palms of His hands*, Isaiah said (49:16). How fast He builds is up to Him. It's His Church. But that He is, there is no doubt.

So the call to repent is the call to change our minds, change our thinking, change what we're hanging on to, and why. It is to think *more* like St. Paul and *less* like the servants in the vineyard. And with changed minds, changed thinking, there will be changed lives. Built on Christ, living in Christ, and Christ living in you, you will produce those fruits of faith God desires. Not grudgingly, because you have to, but joyously, because you have a Saviour who took you from the garbage heap and made you a child of the King. No matter, like St. Paul, how good that garbage heaped looked to you at the time!

And once you know that, how can you not say with St. Paul: ***Rubbish! I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. . . . So I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. . . . So one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*** To the kingdom that awaits. To the feast that has no end. With the King who took my place and became garbage with me, that I could have his place and be and child of God with Him.

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.