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Pentecost 4

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Transforming Gospel”

Text: Matthew 10:5a, 21-33; Romans 6:12-23; Jeremiah 20:7-13

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

In the Holy Gospel last week, we heard Jesus instruct His disciples as He sent them out *to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. That instruction continues in the Holy Gospel today.

And Jesus sent them with His *authority*, but not ease. They will be met with opposition. They will be *as sheep in the midst of wolves*. They will be dragged before the authorities. And why? For proclaiming the good news of Jesus, that He is the promised Messiah, and for healing and casting out unclean spirits. *That* good news and good work, Jesus says, will be hated.

Which seems odd, doesn't it? That's like hating the doctor who heals you!

Well, physical ailments and problems are easier to diagnose than spiritual ones. And easier to acknowledge, too. And just as we can ignore physical symptoms because we don't want to acknowledge we may be sick or have something wrong with us, so too with our spiritual signs of sickness. And while physical healing may be welcomed, spiritual healing may not be. For implicit in the news of a Saviour is that we have need of saving. And as in Jesus' day, not saving from the Romans or any other earthly power or authority, but from ourselves; from our sin. Which means with the good news of a Saviour comes also the not-so-welcomed call *to repentance*.

A call that is often met with denial and opposition. Don't tell me I have an unclean spirit. Don't tell me I'm wrong. Don't tell me I have to change. Don't bother me. I'm fine just the way I am. Even more, I'm GOOD just the way I am. God created me this way. Jesus loves me just the way I am. Except . . . *He didn't, and He doesn't*. He didn't create you with sin, and He doesn't love your sin. That's why He came. Not to accept you *in* it, but to save you *from* it.

And so St. Paul said today in the Epistle, ***Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies***. Now note what Paul didn't say! He didn't say be without sin, for that is impossible this side of eternity. He said not to let it ***reign*** in you; rule you. Now, that

can happen in two ways; two *errors* when it comes to repentance. First, and probably more obvious, is when sin reigns in us because of our resistance to repentance. I don't want to repent and so I won't - I'll let sin reign in my body and claim I'm fine and right and good, and don't you dare say otherwise!

But the second, while maybe not as obvious, is more problematic. The attitude that I'll repent to be forgiven . . . but with no intention to change or resist the sin in my body or even try to. Because I like it. I need this sin. This sin is necessary. It's too hard to try to stop. And it's okay - I'm forgiven anyway! I'll let this sin reign in my body *because I can get away with it.*

Now you know that's not right - either of those things. Both of those is being, as Paul says today, ***a slave to sin***. A slave to that old, sinful Adam in you.

But Jesus has better for you than that. That's why He baptized you - to set you free from the old Adam and his clutches. Which, again, doesn't mean you're not going to sin, or that temptation isn't going to be hard - it most certainly will be! The devil is going to press you hard and exactly where you're weakest. But though you were born with sin and succumb to temptation, your sin isn't who you are - not anymore. You are a baptized child of God. *That's* your identity; *that's* who you are.

You are not defined by your sin, labeled by your sin, marked by your sin, or enslaved to your sin - you belong now to Jesus. To lead not a sinful life but a holy life. A *sanctified* life - that's the fancy word for that. Jesus working in you by His Spirit to give you better.

That's what Jesus came to do and what His baptism does in you. He came to die and rise with your sin on Him, to take it away from you. And then in baptism to take you through His death and resurrection to a new life in Him. If you were fine, if you were good, He wouldn't have done that; He wouldn't have needed to. But He DID because you WEREN'T. He DID so you WOULD BE. So you would be forgiven. Free *from* sin, not free *for* sin.

Which is much needed. For, as Jesus continues in His instructions to His disciples today, the evil in our world is great. A world where (to paraphrase what Jesus said today) parents kill their children with abortion, children kill their parents with euthanasia, and siblings kill each other over the inheritance. A world where we see others as inconveniences rather than gifts and blessings. A me-first, pleasure-first, power-first world. In such a world, the message of the Gospel isn't going to be welcomed with open arms or received with thanks. They didn't thank Jesus; they called Him ***Beelzebul***. They didn't thank Him; *they crucified Him.*

So why bother? Why go through the trial and trouble and tribulation?

That was the prophet Jeremiah's question (or more like his complaint!). They don't want to hear the Word of God. I just get grief for it . . . and worse. *So why bother?* Why put myself through that?

Well here's why: **because that Gospel can transform just such a world.** Because the Gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). It transformed the disciples, it transformed you, and it can do so for others - even the most hard-boiled of sinners. We hear stories of that sometimes - of people caught up in the hardest, nastiest sins who have been rescued by Christ Jesus. Pornographers, murderers, internet scammers, abortionists, atheists, adulterers, traffickers, drug addicts and dealers. No sin too deep, no sinners too great for Jesus and His forgiveness.

That's the world Jesus sends His disciples out into, and the world the Church has been planted into. It's going to tough, Jesus tells them. There's more than you can do; *you'll never be done before the Son of Man comes.* Many will hate you for it just as they hated Me. They'll call you demon-possessed just as they did Me. But in the midst of all that, there will be those who hear, who repent, and who receive the life-changing forgiveness of Jesus. The world needs the Church.

So ***have no fear of them***, Jesus says. Don't be afraid. Easier said than done! Look at the cross - that's what the world does: crucify, death, hatred, opposition. So don't be surprised when that happens. But don't just look at the cross! Look also at the empty tomb - that's what God does! Resurrection, life, love, good, victory! So don't be surprised at that either. When the Word does its work. The one with you is greater than the one in the world. He knows every sparrow that falls to the ground - nothing escapes His notice. And He knows every hair on your head - everything about you. And ***you are of far more value than many sparrows.*** In fact, you are worth the life of God's own Son!

So no matter how bad things gets - and they might get real bad . . . in the early church Christians were fed to wild beasts and burned at the stake. In more modern days, there have been beheadings and imprisonment. But no matter how bad things get, Jesus says, they can only kill the body, not the soul. And Jesus will raise your body to life again, to an eternal reward in heaven, when it will be HIS turn to confess YOU who confessed Him here. For in Jesus, you have a life that death cannot end. You have a life that cannot be overcome by any earthly persecution and sorrow. You have a life purchased and won and nourished by the Body and Blood of God's Son.

You have that. That's your in Christ. So do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of the world and its raging - that's what the world does. But also do not be afraid to repent - that what Christians do. Don't be afraid to humble yourself. Even if others take

advantage of you, God will forgive you and raise you up. And do not be afraid to live the new life you've been given; to let go of those sins that beset you. You may think you're better off with them, but you're not. You may think that you need them, but you don't. They're really holding you back, holding you down, holding you in their grip. That sexual sin, that anger sin, that selfish sin, that power sin, that greed sin, that slothful sin, holding you back from loving your spouse, loving your family, loving life, loving God, and keeping you from the life that Christ has for you. The life Christ is here to give you in word and water and bread and wine. To break that grip so you can live - free from sin, free from fear - even in a world of sin and sorrow. So that forgiven and raised by by Jesus, you can lay down your life for others, as Jesus did for you.

It won't be easy. Jesus is abundantly clear in His words to His disciples today about that! It won't be easy, but what's good often isn't. And heaven is filled not with the high and mighty, but the poor and lowly. The poor in spirit and the lowly in heart. That's who Jesus was, and ***it is enough for the disciple to be like His master***. So don't be afraid to be so now. It won't be easy, but in the end, you will be like Him, too. *In glory*.

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.