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St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“Above and Beyond the Call of Duty??”

Text: Luke 17:1-10

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

Above and beyond the call of duty. That’s what they call it when a soldier performs a particularly heroic deed. When his or her actions go beyond what can normally be expected of an individual. When personal fears, impulses of self-preservation, and even instinct are set aside, and action is taken to save others – even if it means harm to me.

Above and beyond the call of duty. . . . Some of you who are, or have been, in the military probably know of some of these deeds personally. Medals are given in recognition of such heroism and bravery. The rest of us have heard about some of these, or seen some of these acts in movies or on TV. And some are probably never known . . . except for the one who did the deed, and the one who was saved by it. And then between them a bond is formed. Their relationship – whatever it had been in the past – will never be the same again. **Above and beyond the call of duty.**

Jesus speaks of *duty* in the Holy Gospel today. Our duty as Christians. And our duty as Christians is to forgive. The battle we are in is a spiritual one, against a spiritual but very real foe. And so our weapon is a spiritual one: to forgive. To forgive our spouses, our friends, our neighbors, our families, our fellow church members, our co-workers, our classmates, our teachers, our bosses, our pastor . . . to forgive. And not just when we’re asked, but always. And not just once or twice, but as Jesus says, even if your brother keeps asking you. Over and over. Seven times or more a day. You must forgive him. It is what Christians do. It is our duty.

And then from other parts of the Scriptures, we learn even more about forgiveness. That we are not only to forgive our friends, but also our enemies. Those who hate us, those who hurt us, those who persecute us, those who ridicule and make fun of us, those who are working against us . . . even, *I dare say*, those who terrorize us. Forgive them, Jesus says. It is what Christians do. It is our duty.

Now, most of us would make a distinction here! There is *forgiveness*, and then there is forgiveness **above and beyond the call of duty!** Right? And certainly, forgiving our

enemies, forgiving terrorists, forgiving those who hurt me, and forgiving repeatedly falls into this latter category! For forgiving my friends and family is sometimes hard enough! How can I be expected to do this also. That is something beyond me. That is something only the strongest and most heroic Christians can do. And the Apostles seemed to have recognized that fact too, for in response to Jesus' words, they say *"Oh boy! Increase our faith!"*

Jesus' answer to that request is important, and we'll get to that in a moment. . . . But first, notice what Jesus says at the end of our reading: *"So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"* Or in other words, although we may make a distinction between forgiveness, and forgiveness **above and beyond the call of duty**, Jesus does not. It is our duty. All of it. And no medals or special recognition. It is what is expected.

But it's hard, isn't it? It's hard, because in the spiritual battle that we are in, to forgive is to lay down your life for another. It is to not take revenge. It is to take a bullet and not shoot back. . . . And what about what Jesus said about *"rebuking your brother's sin?"* Have you ever tried that? If you do, you can expect a *flurry* of bullets to come your way! It's much easier to say nothing. To live and let live. To mind our own business. But that too, Jesus says, is part of our duty as Christians. It is part of loving your neighbor. It is part of laying down your life for your neighbor, even when it means taking some bullets yourself. . . . In the spiritual battle that we are in, forgiveness is the front lines.

So give the Apostles some credit here. They often say the wrong thing at the wrong time, but they *rightly* recognized here that this forgiveness is beyond them – no matter how deep they dug; no matter how hard they tried. *"Increase our faith!"* This must come from outside them. It must come from Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't simply say "OK! I'll increase your faith!" He responds with a rather enigmatic saying. *"If you had faith like a grain of mustard, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

Now sometimes folks take that verse out of context, and people say those words and wonder why it doesn't happen, and then ignore the whole thing! . . . But Jesus is really not telling us to go around trying to uproot trees! In response to the Apostles' request for faith, He is teaching us something about faith. And specifically, what He is teaching here is that it is not the strength of your faith that determines whether you will be able to throw trees or to forgive. **What makes the difference, rather, is the strength of the one you have faith in.** And so, for example, if I have a weak bodyguard, I can have the strongest faith in the world in him, but he is still weak and probably unable to protect me very well.

But if my bodyguard is strong, I can have a very weak faith in him and he will still be able to protect me very well! What makes the difference is not the strength of my faith, but the strength of the one my faith is in.

And so it is with our faith in God and in our Saviour Jesus Christ. It is not wrong (like the Apostles) to want to have more faith and a stronger faith, but that is not what makes faith powerful – *what makes faith powerful is the one we have faith in*. And so, as Jesus told the Apostles, even faith as small as a grain of mustard will do. **Even faith that small can forgive, because it has the forgiveness given by God.** And so if we find ourselves unable to forgive, or struggling to forgive, or harboring hatred and anger and resentment in our hearts, the answer is not to work on my faith so that I will have the strength to do it! The answer is, rather, to point you to the *object* of your faith, the one you have faith in, so that you will receive all that you need from Him.

And so it is not flying mulberry trees that will give you the strength to forgive – we'd probably try to fly one right into those we're supposed to be forgiving! No, it is *another* tree – **the tree of the cross** – that gives us the strength and the love to forgive. For there is the love that laid down His life for you and me. There is the Son of God who took the bullets of sin and Satan for you and me. There is the One who set aside everything and gave up all that He had for you and me. There is the One who forgave a dirty, rotten, sinner like you and me. Not considering it **above and beyond the call of duty**, but unable to do anything less. For *your* life, *your* salvation, *your* forgiveness depended on it.

And so it is not flying mulberry trees that will win the battle for us – the battle against Satan, the battle to forgive. That battle has already been won, by our Saviour Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection mean that our sins have been paid for and forgiveness is ours. His victory means that the bullets of the enemy cannot harm you. His life means that you too have life, both now and forever. . . . And that victory, that life, that forgiveness won on the cross for you is what you receive here, in the spiritual weapons and spiritual gifts Christ has provided for you: His Holy Word, His Holy Absolution, His Holy Baptism, His Holy Communion. No matter weak or small your faith may be, in these you are here receiving all that you need – for the battle, and for life. Because it is not how strong you or your faith are that makes the difference, but the strength of the One your faith is in. And how strong is He? Stronger than sin, stronger than Satan, stronger than death and hell and grave!

And therefore we *can* forgive. We can take the bullets, we can lay down our lives; no matter the sin, no matter how frequent, no matter the who. Not for an award or a medal or special recognition – in fact, that has already been given to you! You have the promise

of Heaven and eternal life! No, we can forgive, because the One who can throw mulberry trees at His Word will do this in you. For He who overthrew sin, Satan, and death can do this too. In you. No matter how weak or unable you think yourself to be. He is able. . . . And some may look at you in awe because of this, and wonder how you are able to forgive so much and so far *above and beyond the call of duty!* But we know better. It's not us! We are only living by faith, giving what we have been given. It is the greatest gift we as Christians can receive in this life. It is the greatest gift that we can give. . . . And as we do, perhaps we will suffer in this battle; perhaps others will take advantage of us; perhaps we will not be able to see that it makes any difference in the world. That's okay. The results are not up to us. But you just may be surprised in the end, at the difference your forgiveness did make. When in the end, the One who laid down His life for you comes up to you and says, "***Well done, my good and faithful servant!***" But we know it wasn't us! How could He who did so much, commend us who do not do what we are commanded! "***We are unworthy servants!***" . . . But that unworthiness is exactly what He took away from you, took to the cross, and left in the grave. That part of you is dead and buried with Christ, and a new man planted in your heart. A man of faith. A man who answers the call of duty and forgives. Not because you have to, but because you have been saved, you have been forgiven, and now like Christ, you are unable to do anything less.

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.