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Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Restoring the Devastated”

Text: Matthew 18:15-20 (Ezekiel 33:7-9)

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

As the pictures came back from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama this week, of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, I doubt that any of us were unaffected. Your stomach churns, your hearts aches for those people, most of whom have lost everything. Who among us does not want to help? To help restore these folks to some kind of life, with food and water and a shelter over their heads. Perhaps you already have, as so many thousands or millions have already, donating money to a relief organization. In such a situation, you don't wait to be asked, you act. For what are those people to do? How cold would we be if we waited silently, demanding that they first humble themselves and ask for our help. No, that is unthinkable. We help. We must.

And yet, when it comes to spiritual matters of sin and forgiveness, it seems that we are exactly the opposite. The devastation caused by sin in our world is *even worse* than the pictures we have seen this week. But do our stomachs churn and our hearts ache over this? Do we want to help and restore those devastated, or are we cold to their needs? Not wanting to be bothered, not wanting to extend ourselves? Our friends and neighbors and co-workers are caught in addiction to all shapes and sizes of sins, to false belief, superstition, and ignorance. And they need our help. They need to be restored to the life of faith in Jesus Christ. But how often are we silent? . . . If not acting to help those devastated this week is unthinkable, what about this? When not just life, but *eternal* life is at stake!

This is what the Word of God to Ezekiel, and the words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel, would have us understand today. That there is *devastation* all around us, and people in need of *restoration*. Jesus saw this, and so He had compassion – a Greek word meaning that His stomach churned about it; His heart ached so that He cried over Jerusalem. Physical eyes may not be able to see such *spiritual* devastation, but that doesn't make it less real. Jesus is here teaching us that it is real, and that as Christians, we are to do something about it.

So why don't we?

Perhaps it is because we underestimate the devastation caused by sin, and perhaps we do

that because it so often cannot be seen. We *saw* the TV pictures this week. But our friends and neighbors and co-workers seem to be doing just fine without our help – maybe even better than us! But if we believe God’s Word, we know that the spiritual reality is not what we see. For often inside huge homes are lonely people. Inside well-dressed people are often spiritual beggars. Inside a prideful, boastful, seemingly confident person is often a frightened child. And they need our help.

Or perhaps we do nothing because we ourselves have been hurt. When someone sins against you, you are hurt, and you may be angry, and that hurt and anger prevents us from seeing that the same sin that has hurt us has hurt that other person as well. For that’s what sin does. It doesn’t only hurt the one sinned against, it hurts the sinner as it separates from God, as it damages faith. And sin left unchecked to run rampant can ultimately kill faith.

Or perhaps we do nothing because the sin *against* us has flared up the sin *within* us, and so we seek to hurt back. We want revenge. We want that person to come and humble themselves and ask for forgiveness – and then maybe, *maybe* we’ll forgive. *If* they really mean it. *If* we’re satisfied with their repentance. *If* . . . and do you see? The devastating effects of sin! It is a downward spiral, feeding on itself, devastating everyone in its wake!

And so, Jesus says, set aside your anger, your concern for yourself, your self-righteous indignation. Repent of your own sin, forgive, and have concern for your brother. Concern for his devastation, to help him, to bind up his wounds, and restore him. If we do not, we are not only hurting him, we are hurting ourselves. And, as St. Augustine would comment, if we do not, then we are even worse than him! (*Ancient Christian Commentary*, NT Vol. 1b, p. 77)

But that’s easier said than done, isn’t it?

Unless you think of our situation, and what Jesus has done for you. For it is not just *others* who are effected – we are the ones who have been devastated by sin; by the catastrophic damage caused by Satan in the Garden of Eden. And interestingly, the Scriptures often depict that sin as a flood – like what we saw this week: a flood that we cannot stop, that crashes in upon us and overwhelms us and drowns us in its torrents (i.e., 1 Pt 4:4). And in that sin we are lost, were it not for the compassion of our brother, Jesus. Our brother who can see inside our masks and the brave and false fronts we put up, and sees that no, we’re not okay! Our brother who is hurt by our sin, but does not hurt us back. Our brother who has every right to be angry at us for the damage we do to Him and His world, but instead of seeking revenge, sought to restore us. Not waiting first to be asked, but by sending His prophets (like Ezekiel) to speak to us His Word of warning ^[Law] and His Word of restoration and forgiveness ^[Gospel], and then coming Himself. The Son of God coming into this torrent and flood of sin as our brother, and rescuing us at the cost of His own life. Why? Because He saw. He saw the devastation. He saw the pain and misery. He saw the hopelessness and

despair. And in love, He had to act. And He gained His brothers.

And not just once does Jesus restore us, or a few times, but constantly. For while His cross and resurrection took place at one moment in time, the effects and benefits and blessings – His restoration and forgiveness – are for all time. ✠ And so just as the folks in the South need water to live, so do we – and Jesus gives us His water; His restoration and forgiveness given us in Holy Baptism, as He adopts us as His children, so that we are no longer children of sin and Satan, but children of God. ✠ The folks in the South need food to live, and so do we – and Jesus gives us His food; His restoration and forgiveness given us in the bread and wine, His own body and blood, of Holy Communion, to feed us and strengthen us at His Table. ✠ And just as the folks in the South need hope and confidence for the future, so do we – and Jesus gives us His Word: His restoration and forgiveness given us as He absolves us of the guilt of our sin, gives and strengthens faith, and leads us in His way. . . . And all this He does – *giving us these lifelines* He does – not because we ask for it, not because we deserve it, and not for any other reason than that in His great love for us, He has compassion on us, and His heart goes out to us, to restore us. To restore us back into Him, into His family, into His Church, into the life eternal, which He has always planned and desired for us.

And today, He sends us to do the same. To do for others what He has done for us. To win our brothers and sisters. Hard? Yes. Impossible? No. For He does not ask you to do this on your own, but has already given you all you need. The love and compassion and forgiveness to give, He has already given to you, and continues to give to you. It is not yours to keep or withhold. It is yours to give. And in giving, to restore. To restore those who are lost, who are hurting, who are devastated. And in so doing, being like Christ. Being the Christian that you are. Stories of heroism and self-sacrifice are already beginning to come out of New Orleans. And if it is so from those who have nothing, how much more should it be from us, who have everything in our Saviour Christ Jesus?

You know, so often, when we read or hear the words of the Holy Gospel today, we skip the beginning and run right to the excommunication part! Kick the sinner out! Yeah! . . . But that's not what these words are all about. They are about *gaining* your brother. Loving him enough to point out the sin, and to give forgiveness – even when it is not asked for. It is about caring and restoring, which we cannot do unless we have first forgiven him. It is about knowing that I am stuck in my sins, and though the Law is hard to hear, being grateful for it, that I may be restored. And that (as we heard) the power for that restoration lies not up in Heaven, but even here on earth. That I can be sure. That my brother, my Good Shepherd, the very Son of God, who is not willing that any should be lost, is here for me. ***For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.***

Two or three gathered in His Name. To confess and receive His absolution. To receive His

Word and Sacrament. To go with His blessing, forgiven and restored. We are the ones so gathered in His Name, and in His presence. We have received. Now go and see with His eyes. Go and care with His compassion. Go and love with His love. Restore your brothers and sisters, even as your brother has restored you.

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.