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Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“In the Right Place”

Text: Matthew 21:28-32; Philippians 2:1-11

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

Two sons. One's got a mouth. Says what he thinks. Doesn't care if you don't like it – you're gonna hear it! We'd call this one stubborn, rebellious, disrespectful. . . . The other one's different. He knows exactly what to say, what wants to be heard. He says all the right things, but with no intention of ever doing them. A smooth talker. And when his father found out he didn't go as he was asked, and as he said, he probably thought he could talk his way out of that as well. . . . You know the types. So, **“Which of the two sons did the will of his father?”** The answer is really neither! As a parent, I can tell you that! Neither would make me very happy. . . . And yet there is a difference between the two sons. For when the Jewish leaders point to the first son as the one who did the will of his father, Jesus doesn't disagree. For the first son didn't only eventually do what his father asked of him, he did something much more important. He changed his mind. He *repented*.

Now, in the church, we talk a lot about repentance, and for many, that word usually brings to mind a *negative* image. I'm going to be told I'm a sinner. I'm going to be told to confess my sins. I'm going to be shown how I don't measure up. And we don't like those things. They're negatives. They lower our self-esteem. They make us *feel* bad. And that may be true. And some people avoid church, and avoid repentance because of that. And maybe that's our fault; if we stop there in explaining repentance. Because if we stop there, at the negative, then we haven't fully considered repentance. Because repentance isn't just a *negative* thing – it is a *positive* thing as well. Because repentance restores us to our right place before God and others; and it puts us in position to receive the gifts of God.

Now first, consider that repentance puts us in our right place – both before God and others. Now, being put in our right place implies that we're not in that right place to begin with! And that's true! That's what sin has done to us – it's taken us out of our right place and put us where we do not belong. The two sons that Jesus talked about were both out of place. And don't we see this in ourselves too. Sometimes we're the mouthy son

with God, questioning Him and His ways, not wanting to do what He wants; and sometimes we're the smooth talker, *saying* all the right things, but with no intention of doing them. And we're out of place, aren't we? We're out of line. We're children who want to be the parents. Employees who want to be the boss. Christians who wants to be God.

And we can especially see this when we look at ourselves in the mirror of the words we heard in the Epistle from Philippians. ***“Do nothing from rivalry or vain conceit . . . in humility, count others more significant than yourselves . . . Look each of you not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*** . . . If that's what we're being told to be like and to do, then it's not too hard to see that we're out of place in our lives; we're out of line, in our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires. And we need to change our minds, and our thinking. . . . But that's not easy. *These things are not easy!* Lowering ourselves, humbling ourselves, repenting before God and before others . . .

But that is our place. That is where God wants us to be. For when we are doing that we are loving our neighbor, fulfilling His commandments. Seeing our neighbor not as a bother, or in the way, but as an opportunity to love, to serve, and to give. And in all those ways, it gives us the opportunity to be like Christ. And that is what Paul then goes on to say in this reading: ***“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”***

That is a picture of perfect love. That is a picture of Jesus being the son we could never be. The One doing the will of His Father perfectly and completely. And held up against that picture, *we're out of place*. Oh, sometimes we do those things, maybe. But doesn't the Old Adam keep pulling us above our neighbor, above God. But repentance puts us back again. Back in our place. Back where our Father wants us to be. For when we are where our Father wants us to be – it's not just an obedience thing! – it's that there, we are in position to receive the gifts of God, to receive His forgiveness. Not that we earn it by our repentance, or by how sorry we are! But in repentance, we're in a position to receive it by faith. When we're out of place, when we're rebelling, receiving God's gifts for us is the last thing on our minds! We're thinking about ourselves, not God and His gifts! But as repentance puts us in our place, where we belong, our eyes of faith are again focused on our Father and on Jesus and on receiving His gifts and His will for our lives. And we are in position to receive the gifts that God so wants to give to us!

And again, this is what we see in the perfect Son, Jesus, in the reading from Philippians, where after we are told that ***“He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*** we are then told, ***“Therefore God has highly exalted him . . .*** The Son is raised from the dead! And the Son who gave up everything, loses nothing, for the will of the Father is not to deprive us, but to give to us. To give us His life and salvation. To give us forgiveness. To set us free from our captivity. To give us all that He is and all that He has. To raise us up and give us His kingdom.

And at the end of the Parable of the Two Sons in the Holy Gospel, it is this exaltation that Jesus speaks of – and who does He say are being exalted? Well much to the horror of the people He’s speaking to, the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus says it’s the tax collectors and the prostitutes! They are the ones, He says, that are entering the Kingdom of God! Not because they earned it or deserved it – obviously not! But because they are the ones who came to know their place. They are the ones who believed that they could make absolutely no claims before God. They could not smooth talk and demand that God owed them *anything!* But in repentance and faith, *changing their minds*, relying completely and solely on Christ, the perfect Son, and His merits – and therefore by faith – they received what they in no way deserved! God’s gifts of forgiveness and life!

And you and me as well. We who are no better than the tax collectors and prostitutes. We who can make absolutely no claims before God, who can make no demand that God owes us *anything!* That is our place. That is what we confessed earlier. But in such repentance and faith, relying completely and solely on Christ, the perfect Son, and His merits, we have been promised the forgiveness and life of the perfect Son. Through His Word of Absolution, through His body and blood given to us here, He lifts us up from the depth and muck and mire of our sin and rebellion, and gives us life and salvation and all that He is and all that He has. In repentance, we lose nothing, but gain everything. And we, who like the tax collectors and prostitutes, have nothing on our own, have everything in Him! Exalted from sinners to sons.

So we need not fear repentance, or avoid it as something negative. We need not be reluctant to lower and humble ourselves before others in asking for – and giving – forgiveness. We need not be afraid to serve, and consider other above ourselves. For that is our place. That is exactly where God wants us to be. And that is where it’s best for us to be! For there you are not relying on yourself, but on Christ. There, your eyes and heart are not focused on yourself, but on Christ. And there, by faith, you are receiving His gifts . . . until that day when God finally exalts you and lifts you up from this earth, and you will finally be in the right place – the place where God has always wanted you to be – right by His side, in His kingdom, forever!

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.