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Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Cross Vocations”

Text: Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

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

On this Labor Day weekend, our country takes time out to honor the work and vocations that we have been given in our lives. Work and vocations that are good and useful. Work and vocations that we do not just to make money, but to serve our fellowman. For it is through the work and service of both believers and unbelievers alike that God provides our daily bread - all that we need to support this body and life. And so what you do - whatever you do - is good and valuable, whether you are a pastor or a painter, a garbage collector or a governor, a teacher or yes, even a telemarketer!

But in addition to our work and vocations in this world, you and I have also been given the vocation of Christian. To live and work in this world as a child of God. That is a special vocation, a gift, that does not really add to our other vocations, but informs and shapes how we do them. And it was St. Paul today who gave us a rather long and extensive list of what we are to do, and how we are to live, in this world as Christians. Now, the list that he gives is certainly meant for *every* person, for the Law is for all people. But Paul is talking here especially to Christians - to us! - to those redeemed by Christ, the crucified, and so now live as new creations in this world.

Do you remember that list? Perhaps a reminder . . . ***“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. . . . [B]e patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. . . . Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil . . . never avenge yourselves . . . if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink . . .”***

How ya' doing so far? Yeah, me either.

Why? Why is it so hard for us to do those things? Why, when we read through a list like that, do we think those things so extraordinary and beyond our ability?

Well, perhaps Peter can give us a little help today. He had some trouble with some of the things Jesus was saying to him, too. And Jesus gave him the reason for it: **“you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”** Perhaps that is what we do too. Doubting the work of God for us and in us, and doubting the work of God in the world, and so doubting that it is possible for me to do those things God asks of me. Because if I do, I won't be able to survive. I'll get taken advantage of, used and abused and stepped on, and won't be able to get ahead. I won't get what I want or need. *It's just not the way the world works.*

Well, *that's* true - it's not the way the world works. But it is the way our Lord works. Our Lord who said it is the meek who inherit the earth. (Matt 5:5) Who says those who are weak are strong. (2 Cor 12:10) Who says you are blessed when you are hated and persecuted (Matt 5:11) - or to put that in a more modern way: when you are taken advantage of, used and abused and stepped on, for living as a Christian. **This is the way our Lord works because it is the way of the cross.** The way that believes that what is true is not always what is seen, what is good is not always what is popular, and that the blessings of God are often hidden under suffering.

But this way of thinking - and living! - does not come naturally to us - not to Peter, and not to us. And so first we must be exorcised. Exorcised of our old way of thinking, of our demons, of our sins. And this Jesus does for us in Baptism. For there, in those waters, is His divine **“Get behind me, Satan!”** for each of us. Get thee out of my child, and make room for my Spirit, the Holy Spirit. There we are marked with the sign of the cross and given the name of the Triune God. There Jesus worked in us and gave us all His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. In Baptism we are adopted into His family and made sons of God.

But the devil does not like this divine exorcism, and so though expelled, will not leave you alone. He cannot make you sin, so he tries to make you doubt - to doubt the ways of God, to fear and love instead the things and people of the world, to make you believe that what you see is the way things really are, and in all these ways turning and *setting your heart and mind not on the things of God, but on the things of man.* And sins of mind and heart quickly become sins of word and deed.

Look what happened to Peter. One moment (in the verses just before the Holy

Gospel we heard today), Peter was confessing Jesus as *the Christ, the Son of the living God*. (Matt 16:16) But then when confronted with the cross by Jesus, he changes, and objects, saying, *“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”* That is the English translation, anyway. What Peter actually said was something like, *“There will be grace to you, Lord!”* meaning, God will be gracious; God will not make you go through something like that; there will be another way. With such a statement, Peter was expressing faith in God and His grace, *but he didn't understand that grace, and how God would show His grace through Jesus and His cross*. That Jesus *must* be crucified to atone for the sin of the world. That there was no other way. This is why Jesus had come. Peter was thinking like the world, and so he needed to be exorcised.

And so do we. So that our minds that have been turned onto the ways and things of this world be turned back to God in repentance. And that repenting we again receive the forgiveness and life won for us by Jesus on the cross and first given to us in Baptism, and so be raised with Jesus from the death of sin to live a new life. That our hearts and minds be set again on the ways and things of God, not the ways and things of man, and that our words and deeds then follow. That we live by faith not in ourselves, but in all the words of promises of God, given to us in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 1:20).

And that is what Jesus meant when He said to us today, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* That doesn't mean that as Christians we have to suffer - although we may. It means, rather, that our hearts and minds be ruled by the cross, for that is to have the mind of God. It is to see in the cross in our lives as something good, not bad. To take up the cross means to believe that what is true is not always what is seen, that what is good is not always what is popular, and that the blessings of God are often hidden under suffering. It is to repent of myself and my ways, and receive the forgiveness and life of Jesus in His Spirit, and so live the vocation given to me as a child of God.

So too, in that way, do we deny ourselves - another phrase that is also often misunderstood. For to deny yourself *doesn't mean* that you can't have anything good or can't have any fun. **No, to deny yourself means to confess Christ.** To enjoy the things of this world not as our gods, but as gifts from God. To use the things of this world not selfishly, but in love and service and to share them with others. And to know that whether the things of this world come or go, that neither affects or reflects our relationship with Jesus. For to confess Christ and his cross is to confess a far greater reality than the things of this world, and to cling to promises far greater. Promises that will not end with this world and life, but which

will carry us through to the next.

And so Jesus ended His teaching to us today by pointing us to that greater reality, with these words: ***“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”*** Do you know who those folks are? *You*. For now you will again see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. You will see with the eyes of faith His coming to you here and now in His body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. His coming for you with forgiveness for all your sins. His coming for you with life. His coming to give you all that you need. He has nothing more to give than He gives to you here. It is a kingdom that may be hidden for now, but that makes it no less real. You are His, and He is yours.

That is why the Christian life looks so upside-down to the world! We live in a different kingdom, with different minds, with different faith. But in reality, it is not we who are upside-down, it is the world, turned on its head in sin. And so in living the Christian life, the vocation our Father has so graciously given us, we have an opportunity to show the world not what is wrong with us, but what is right with us. To confess to them - in word and deed - the mind of Christ and the gift of His forgiveness. His forgiveness which changes our minds. His forgiveness which changes our hearts. His forgiveness which makes all the difference in the world.

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.