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Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Many Variables, One Constant”
Text: Mark 9:14-29; Isaiah 50:4-10

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

My son is taking algebra in school this year as his math class. Do you remember algebra? The mere mention of the word sends groans out of mouths and shivers down the spines of many people. But what makes it so tough? It is that with algebra, math isn't quite so concrete anymore. You begin working with *variables*. The equations no longer have just numbers, but x's, y's, and z's. And the more variables, the harder the problem, and the harder it is to figure out what to do. But the problems *can* be figured out, because with the variables there are also *constants* - numbers or values that are definite. And it's the constants that provide a place from which to work and enable the problems to be solved.

But even if you don't remember much about algebra - or never took it - you know about these things, because variables and constants aren't just the things of math, but the things of life. In your life there are *variables* - things that change, that aren't certain, that are elusive and undependable; but there are also *constants* - things that don't change and that you can rely on. And like with math, life gets harder when the variables increase - when there are too many uncertain and undependable and changing things in your life, and not enough certain ones. Then you don't know what to do. Then come the groans, the shivers, the confusion, and the fears.

And that's where the father in the Holy Gospel today was at - he didn't know what to do. His son had a unclean spirit for a number of years, since his childhood. It had tormented him greatly, and put him in physical danger. The father had undoubtedly done all he could think of to help his son, but nothing worked. And then, with great hope, he had asked Jesus' disciples to help him and cast out this spirit, but even this failed. And now there was a great argument going on, between the Jewish scribes, the disciples, and the crowd that had gathered. He was, this father, at the end of his rope and on very shaky ground.

For what could he count on? His faith? He tried, but his faith was one day up and one day down; one day strong and one day weak; one day full of hope and the next day filled with fear. Just like you and me. No, his faith was not a constant he could count on. Neither could he count on his friends - they were using the occasion to

argue while his son continued to be tormented. He couldn't count on his own strength or steadfastness - that was quickly slipping away. And his good works? What good were they? He couldn't even do good for who mattered most to him, his own son. His life was filled with confusion, uncertainty, and failure. What would the unclean spirit do next? What would *he* do next? What would happen next? There were too many variables and . . . well, were there *any* constants?

As we remembered on Friday, September 11, 2001 was such a day for many people. The death of a loved one is such a time for many people. A difficult medical diagnosis, the loss of a job, moving to a new home in a strange place, friends turning on you and letting you down - all can be such times. Times when we feel the ground giving way beneath us and the variables piling up and we are so shaky we don't feel as if we can take even one more step, and not knowing what to do we cry out with the father of this boy: Lord, ***"I believe; help my unbelief!"***

And there is your constant. When all the variables - and even the constants - in our lives that we thought we could count on have let us down, there is One who remains constant. Not that He wasn't always there, it's that we keep substituting other things we think we can stand on, but that always let us down. There is only One who is reliable. Only One who is the constant to solve the variables. Only One who, as we prayed, is *our support and defense in every need*. The One who, as Isaiah said, ***set His face like a flint*** to go to the cross. The cross where there is *nothing* variable. The cross where there is only the constant of the love of God laying down His life for you; the constant of the love of God taking your sin away from you and paying for it Himself; the constant of the love of God to provide for you what otherwise you would not have - life and hope.

And so you have a constant in this very variable life: Jesus.

And so in answer to this father's need, Jesus drives out the unclean spirit with His Word. Good, right? Well, yes . . . though at first, it seems as if this too has been a colossal failure, that instead of saving the boy, He has killed him! For, we are told, ***he looked like a corpse and most of them said, "He is dead."*** But no - our constant remains constant, and what looks like death is turned to life. Jesus takes him by the hand and raises him to a new life.

It is a small picture of the cross - another place where it seems as if this has all been a colossal failure! Where another Son, instead of being saved, was killed and was a corpse and was placed dead into the ground . . . and it seemed as if the unclean spirits had won. But again, no - our constant remains constant, and death is turned to life. Jesus rises from the dead to a new life.

And that is a small picture of what has happened to you as well. For Jesus has come

to you and driven out your unclean spirit with His Word and water in Holy Baptism. Good, right? Well, yes . . . though at first, perhaps you look at your life and it seems as if this has been a colossal failure! For still you have sin and death instead of life. But no - your constant remains constant, as in the midst of sin and death Jesus here and now reaches out His hand and raises you in forgiveness; as Jesus reaches out His hand and feeds you with His own body and blood; as Jesus reaches out to you and gives you new life.

And these we can rely on. Our constants, our hope and life in a very uncertain world.

Now, satan wants you to think otherwise - that Jesus is just another variable in your life, that you cannot rely on. *And we believe it sometimes, don't we?* Wondering about God, what He is doing, why He isn't doing what we think He should, and thinking Him unreliable. Yet still He remains constant, and repentance is turning back to our constant and receiving from Him what will not fail - His forgiveness and life.

That is the meaning of that funny statement at the end of the Gospel today, when Jesus says that ***"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."*** That *doesn't* mean that prayer is some sort of magic formula, or that this was some sort of "super demon" - but that there is only One power, One constant, that can give us life, and that is Jesus. For prayer is the voice of faith. Faith that turns to our Lord for all that is needed, repenting and despairing of ourselves and turning to Him where He has promised to be for us, to receive what He has promised to give to us. And He does not let us down!

Like the disciples, we have to learn that. Perhaps you too think you should be able to do it. Perhaps you too have turned to Jesus and said, *"How come I can't do it?"* How come I keep failing and sinning and doubting and falling?

The truth is that you could never do it! The good news is that you don't have to. You are not your constant, Jesus is your constant. The One who came and did it for you. His perfect life, His death in your place, His resurrection from the dead, His forgiveness and salvation, His life and hope - all is yours. From Him.

For that is the way of it with Jesus. He does what you can't, to give you what you do not have. That from the first page of your life to the last, He be the constant. His forgiveness, His life, His love, giving you peace and hope and joy. Giving, until that day when His voice will call again and He reaches out His hand - *one more time* - to take hold of you and pull you from the grave. That day is the day when *all* variables will finally pass away, and Christ, our constant, will be all in all.

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.