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Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“How Large is Your Millstone?”  
Text: Mark 9:38-50

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

Our Lord would have us be salt in this world. A preservative against the corruption of sin that is decaying and rotting the world all around us. To be truth in a world of lies. To be life in a world of death. To be light in a world of darkness. To be kindness in a world of cruelty. To be merciful in a world of selfishness. To be love in a world of indifference and hate. And so as Christians, we are not to be the same as the world, but different.

But are we? In how we think, in how we act, in how we speak, in what we desire? In all these things and in all these ways, are we preserving the world, or is the world corrupting us? Perhaps, like the people of Israel, our grumbling and complaining are signs that all is not right with us. Perhaps we are jealous for the wrong things and do not see the seriousness of our lack of contentment and the sins that brings with it. And so we look back to Egypt with longing eyes, thinking that God’s ways are not so good, are too hard, and that the world is offering something better.

But our Creator knows the devastation of sin. All sin. The sin we so often don’t think twice about, or consider not so bad, or even think harmless. We are wrong. It is *better*, Jesus says, to remove the parts of our bodies that cause us to sin than to let those sins remain and continue. It would be *better* to have a great millstone hung around your neck and you be cast into the sea. We shudder at such thoughts, but Jesus says these things are *better* than the alternative. *Better* than being condemned for your sin and spending eternity apart from God, where those body parts you saved *here* only serve as food for ***the worm that does not die and the fire that is not quenched*** there.

And so these words of Jesus should open our eyes today - not to despair, but to our need, and to the One who came to meet our needs. For the One who speaks these words came not to condemn us *with* them, but to save us *from* them. That what we deserve, we may not receive, but instead live in that life that is *better*. A life that is whole and complete and unburdened by sin. The life from above which Jesus has come down to give to you.

It is the life that you need, for you are greatly burdened by sin. For how great is your millstone? I know that it is very great indeed. For I know that mine is very great indeed. But the depths of the sea into which you were cast is not a sea of condemnation and death, but instead a sea of mercy; a sea of forgiveness; the sea of Holy Baptism. For there is the water that Jesus has come to provide to deal with your sin. There is the water in which Jesus Himself was baptized, that your millstone might be hung around His neck instead of yours. And with your millstone hung around His neck, that He be cast into the depths of sin, death, and grave on the cross, that what you deserve you may not receive, but instead live a new life.

And so like Jonah, who was cast overboard for the peace of others and then swallowed by the great fish, Jesus was cast into the depths for your peace and swallowed up by death. But then also like Jonah, Jesus came forth three days later - a resurrection to a new life. And in Holy Baptism, that is the resurrection and life that you too receive. That in those waters your death become His death, and His life become your life. That set free from the burden of your sin, you can live again. Not in despair, but in freedom and peace and joy.

And with that new life, to be salt in this world. Salt, for in your baptism, not only did you receive the life of Jesus, you were also given His Spirit. Just as in the reading from Numbers that we heard, when the Spirit was taken from Moses and placed upon the others - and yet was not diminished! - so now has the Spirit of Christ been given to you. **To be the salt of life in a dying world.** For the life and Spirit of Christ now live in you.

What does such a life look like? There is no one answer, but it can look as simple - as Jesus said - as giving a cup of cold water to another. As simple as praying, speaking the truth, forgiving. But though these may look simple, they are not easy. For though our millstones have been removed in baptism, and though we were there given a new life, our old hands and feet and eyes and tongues and hearts remain, remnants of our old sinful flesh still clinging to us, and leading us into sin. Leading us where we do not want to go.

Better to cut them off, Jesus says, than to let them take you there. But better yet is to repent, and receiving the cleansing forgiveness of Jesus, now offer your body and its parts no longer to sin, but in service. That as we prayed in the collect, our Father would *mercifully direct and govern us by [His] Holy Spirit that we may complete the works [He has] prepared for us to do.* To use our hands to help instead of to hurt. To use our feet to walk with those in need. To use our eyes to look upon others in mercy. To use our tongues not to gossip, but to forgive. **And so be the salt of love in a world where love is often in short supply.**

And these things you are now able to do for one very important reason: because your life *now* and your life *forever* have already been taken care of. You have the promises of God in Christ that there is nothing more precious to Him than you; that He will provide for you now and in the hour of your death. And so in Jesus, you are now free - from your millstone of sin, and from death and hell, so that what remains for you now *is life*. To live as a child of God.

And so our prayer is fulfilled. Just as Moses' prayer for the Spirit to be poured out was fulfilled, so too our prayer for the Spirit is fulfilled. For, as James told us today: ***"the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."*** And you are righteous - not because of what you have done! - but because you have been joined to Christ, the righteous one. He takes your prayers into His, even as we make His prayer our own, and so we know our prayers are both heard and answered. For Christ's sake. So be bold in your prayers! Even, even when you find yourself under the weight of the cross.

For as Jesus showed us, the cross is not for evil but for good. It is to give us life. And so from the cross flowed not only life-giving prayers from Jesus' lips, but life-giving blood from His veins, that the cup He now gives to us is not a cup of cold water, but the cup of His blood, *shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins*. That we feast no longer on the things of sin and death, but eating His body and drinking His blood, we feast on life, and so have life. *For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation*. For you. That you may live. And living, **be the salt of light in a very dark and evil world**.

And that is who you are. Truly. For though you fail, your Saviour never fails. Though you fall, He is here to raise you. And though you may not think you are much of a Christian, and deserve to have that millstone back and all your body parts cut off, Jesus says no. You are mine. And He is using you as His salt in this world, in ways that you know, and in ways that you know not. And He is preserving you with His forgiveness and life, until forgiveness is needed no more - on that day when He takes you to Himself and to the life that never ends.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, that day is coming. That great and awesome day. But until it does, do not fear, do not lose hope, do not give up. Your Saviour is faithful. And He will do it, for He has done it. Go in peace, you are free.

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.