

26 June 2011
Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Prince of Peace Who Comes With a Sword”
Text: Matthew 10:34-42 (Jeremiah 28:5-9; Romans 7:1-13)

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

If today's reading had come one week earlier, then the Holy Gospel for today would have been proclaimed on Father's Day. That would have made, I think, for some interesting sermons. That on that day set aside to honor earthly fathers, we would have heard Jesus say: ***“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father.”*** And then we would have heard even more: ***“and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.”*** Happy Father's Day!

This is not the kind of Jesus many people are used to hearing about. Or honestly, the kind of Jesus many people want. These are shocking words, and words that, perhaps, make us uncomfortable. *Which is why they're good.* These words today challenge us, make us think, and force us to consider: *What is our faith all about?* And as we start into the long, green Pentecost season today, with its focus on growing in the Christian life and faith, these words set the tone for us. The Christian life may not always be what we think, and it surely will not always be easy. **For Jesus is the Prince of Peace who comes with a sword.**

Now, to be clear, Jesus is not anti-family. Families were His idea, beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve and His command to them to “be fruitful and multiply.” Families are gifts from God, protected by no less than three of the Ten Commandments. (Uh . . . that would be the fourth, sixth, and tenth, in case you were wondering.)

But what comes first? Family, or the truth of God's Word? It would be wonderful if that choice didn't have to be made, and if that's true about your family, consider yourself blessed. It would also be wonderful if we could speak the truth of God's Word with our family and remain family - but so often, that's not the case. God's Word is a sword that divides. And so instead of speaking the truth, we compromise it, or remain silent, to keep peace in the family. It isn't right, we know. But it's easier. Maybe another time . . . but another time never seems to come.

And then what does Jesus say? ***Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.***

And we know we are not worthy. Not even a little. The cross is hard, and it's dangerous, and we're scared. Oh, we make a good show of it here, in Church, where it's safe. We sing hymns like "Lift High the Cross" and confess our Creeds and vow to be faithful even unto death, but then we walk out those doors and what happens?

Jesus is the Prince of Peace who comes with a sword - a sword that, if you're like me, is piercing your heart right now. *That's good.* Repent. Just as doctors use scalpels and cut in order to heal, so the Word of God cuts in order to heal. And so Jesus cuts in order to heal. He exposes the sin, to heal with His forgiveness. He is here to make the unworthy worthy, and to give you peace. Not peace with the world, but peace with God. That though your family relationships are important, you not find your life in them, but in here. In Christ. In His death and resurrection that gives you life now and life forever.

For in truth, that sword that pierces you now, first came down upon Jesus, on the cross. It came down upon Him because all your unworthiness, all your compromise, all your silence, all your paralyzing fear, all your sin He took upon Himself, to bear its penalty for you, in your place. To set you free and give you life. Freedom and life that are found only in Him.

Now, *you know that.* But still it's hard, isn't it? It was hard for the prophet Jeremiah to faithfully speak God's Word. Other prophets were telling the people what they wanted to hear and so they didn't like old Jeremiah very much - and they let him know it. St. Paul also, we heard, could not free himself from the grip of sin that plagued him every day. And for us, too, every day is a battle against the sin and fear and unbelief that lives in our hearts, that tell us Jesus and Word are not enough. That we cannot quite let go of the world. We cannot quite let go of our lives.

But listen to what St. Paul said about this; about this every day battle we face. He said: ***Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.***

Paul speaks there of a new and different reality, that came to be in your baptism, where you were joined to Christ in His death and resurrection. That in baptism, you die and belong to another. That in baptism you die to the law and its condemnation; you die to that which you cannot let go of; you die to sin and its power; you die with Christ *and are raised with Him*, that set free from sin, you belong to Him and live in Him.

Now, Paul doesn't mention baptism here in these verses we heard today, but he's been talking about it this way all through the previous chapter, and so those who heard this letter knew this is what he was talking about - the baptismal life. That baptism is dying and rising with Christ. That baptism is receiving a new life in Christ. That baptism is your new birth into the family of God.

The family of God! You see, that's the key to understanding these verses of the Holy Gospel today. By virtue of your baptism into Christ, there's a *new* family to which you belong. A new family that transcends the bounds of time and space. A new family that will not last just for a time, but for eternity.

So even though the world will tell you that **blood is thicker than water** - that our earthly family relationships create a kind of bond that should not be broken by the things of this world that, by comparison, are like water . . . but Jesus is teaching us that the truth is exactly the opposite. For in our new family, our new life, **water is thicker than blood**. The water and Word of Holy Baptism creates a bond that is greater than any other on earth - not just a bond that we have with each other, but the bond that we have with each other *by virtue of our being united in Christ*. It is Christ that holds us together, Christ who gives us hope, Christ who by His blood gave power to this water, Christ who makes us all brothers and sisters and children of our heavenly Father, in Him.

And so in Christ we have a family and life that we cannot lose. Not because we're so great, or because there won't be any strife and disagreements in the church - there will be! We're still sinners. But because we are united in the One who is greater than our sin, who gave His life to give us life. And so it is exactly in losing your life in baptism, losing your life in repentance, losing your life in service, losing your life in Christ - you find a life that is even greater. A life that will have no end.

All of which is not to say our earthly families are not important - they are! But since we've just had two marriages here this past month, perhaps something that is said at many marriages can help us understand. For it is said that when two people get married, *we're not losing a son, we're gaining a daughter*.

Well by faith, that is what happens here. In Christ, we're not losing our earthly families, but gaining a new family. And so we have not just an earthly Father, but now a heavenly Father and also many earthly fathers and mothers, and grandparents, and brothers and sisters, and children and grandchildren! Time may take away our earthly families, space may separate us, and the Word of God may divide - but look at how richly God has rewarded those who abide in the truth of His Word! With a family that does not compete against Him for love and loyalty, but which is created by those very things. With a family that does not depend on us

to keep it together, but one which *He* keeps together. For that which God brings together, He will keep together. Together in Him. United through Baptism, bound together by the Word, strengthened in forgiveness, and fed by the body and blood of the very Son of God! The Son of God in whom we are all sons of God.

And that's why Jesus ends these words as He does, by talking about receiving His apostles, His prophets, His righteous ones, His children. These are those who speak His life-giving, family-creating Word. These are those who belong to Christ and are our family of faith. To receive them is to receive Christ and His Word. His Word by which we are born from above and given faith, are kept in that faith, and are given the reward of that faith - the gift of eternal life.

That's why we put this baptismal font front and center in the church. For it is the font and front and center of our lives. We put it here so that you can't look at the altar or the cross without looking also at it. So that if you walk up to this altar, you must go by it. So that it remind you that this is why you're here; that **water is thicker than blood**. That no matter what happens in this world, no matter the divisions and struggles, no matter the sin and death - nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He has claimed you as His own, and you are His. Born again into His family. Or as St. John would later proclaim: ***"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are"*** (1 John 3:1).

That is what you are. And so this really is a good reading to begin this Pentecost season - to remind us who we are in Christ. To remind us that even though Father's Day in the world was last week, baptized into Christ, *every day is our heavenly Father's Day* - another day lived in His grace, in His love, in His forgiveness, in His care. Every day, another day as His sons and daughters in Christ - which may bring struggles, challenges, and division, and will certainly bring failures; but which also will bring great blessing. For your heavenly Father is always blessing. It may not always feel like it or seem like it, but the sword cuts in order to heal. And so it is. And it is good.

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.