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Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Peace in Christ”

Text: Jeremiah 23:16-29; Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:17-12:3

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

Peace and prosperity preachers are not a new phenomenon. They fill pulpits and the airwaves and the shelves of bookstores in our day and age but were around at the time of Jeremiah too. And what do they preach? Jeremiah tells us: ***They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’*** “These are preachers who do not preach against sin, who do not call people to repentance, who want people to feel good about themselves and proclaim the lie that God loves you *just the way you are*.

Well, to put it kind of crassly, and as you heard from Jeremiah this morning, nothing “burns God’s butt” more than that. For God wants the truth proclaimed: that sin is sin, that judgment is coming, that you’re not okay just the way you are, and that you need to give up your false gods and your sinful ways and trust in Him alone. That’s the word Jeremiah proclaimed. But - then as now - it’s the other message that’s more popular. It’s easier on the ears and what people *want* to believe, even you and me. Truth or not.

But is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

Or in other words, God’s Word is not a self-help book or a book to affirm you and build your self-esteem. It is challenging and convicting. A *fire* to burn off the sins and impurities in your life. A *hammer* to break your hard and stoney heart. So that the water of baptism, the word of forgiveness, and the Body and Blood of the Lord raise you to and keep you in a new life, a right life, as a child of God. That’s what God wants. That’s what matters. For if churches are full but the Word is not preached, what good is that? But if the Word is preached, then even (Jesus says) *where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them* (Matt 18:20).

Well that’s the background for the words we heard from Jesus today in the Holy Gospel. Some very difficult words from Jesus. Words that bother a lot of people

when they hear them. Words that make Jesus sound like a home wrecker and a fourth commandment breaker. Dividing homes and families. But with Jeremiah in the background, when Jesus says that He has not come to bring peace on earth, He is saying: *I did not come to be one of those kind of preachers.* You've had them and have them still, but I'm not one of them. I did not come to tell you you're okay just the way you are. I did not come to make you feel good about yourselves and resolve your family disputes. I did not come to make you comfortable in your sin and sinful ways. I came to tell you the truth. **To cast the fire of God's Word on the earth.** A fire to purify and strengthen and save.

Because the truth is, you're not okay . . .

It's not okay that you fear love and trust other people and things more than your Father in heaven.

It's not okay that you give God a bad name by calling yourself a Christian and not living as one, that you don't call upon Him in prayer enough, and so often fail to thank Him for His goodness to you.

It's not okay that you do not keep His Word or hear or read or know it as you should.

It's not okay that you listen to the wisdom and opinions of the world and believe and follow them more than God's truth.

It's not okay that you disobey your parents, despise your authorities, and speak unkindly of them, or that you will sin in order to please your family and friends.

It's not okay that you harbor angry thoughts, hold on to bitterness and resentment, and speak harshly toward others.

It's not okay that babies keep being murdered before they are born and you remain silent.

It's not okay that you look at those pictures, fantasize in your mind, fail to speak out for God's design for marriage, and think that how you use your sexuality - and with who, and with how many - is up to you.

It's not okay when you take what is not yours - legally or not, or when you take advantage of others, and when you fail to help your neighbor in need, either because you are too busy, don't want to be inconvenienced, or just don't care.

It's not okay when you gossip, betray, slander and assume bad things about others. And those little white lies - they're not okay either.

It's not okay that you're not content with what you have, but want more and want what others have, even at their expense, and want God to give it to you . . . now.

It's not okay that *not only* do you not love your neighbor as yourself, you don't even know half your neighbor's names.

And it's not okay that you think all that really doesn't matter, that God will

understand, that everybody does it.

It's not okay, and you're not okay.
It's uh . . . getting kind hot in here, isn't it?

A lot of people didn't like Jeremiah for preaching that word. A lot of people didn't like Jesus for preaching that word. And maybe you don't like hearing that word. You shouldn't like it, actually. God's Word, as we heard from Jeremiah, is like a hammer - so it *should* feel like you just hit your thumb with a hammer. It *should* hurt. That's good.

That's good, because if you think you can find your goodness in yourself and think you're doing okay, what will happen when that bubble bursts? (And it will burst.) What then?

Bo Giertz wrote a great story about that - about a man whom everyone considered holy. It was unanimous - if there was such a thing as a "good Christian," this guy was it. But then he got sick - very sick - and on his death bed, delirious, all sorts of vile, evil things began coming out of his mouth. Awful things he thought about other people, sinful things he had done but no one had known about, and desires so wicked they would have made satan blush. And people were horrified. Not only at him, at this man they thought holy but wasn't . . . but also for themselves. Was there hope then for them? And would this also happen to them? Would everyone one day find out who they really were? Underneath the good, holy looking appearance? Underneath the appearance of peace and prosperity?

You see, that right there is the difference between the false prophets and Jeremiah; between those who would *today* preach peace and prosperity and those who preach Christ. The former produce good feelings and appearances that are deceptive at best, and also temporary and fleeting; the latter a faith and hope that is true and solid and lasting. For it is a faith and hope not in yourself and what you can do and your goodness, but in the One who came to provide for you a righteousness you could never achieve, a goodness that doesn't depend on you. A righteous one who became unrighteous for you, so that you who are unrighteous might be righteous in Him.

And so, Jesus preached, He is that one. To hope in. ***I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished.*** He's not talking there about His baptism in the Jordan at the hand of John the Baptist. That has already taken place. He is talking, rather, about His baptism still to come, His baptism of fire, His cross, when He will put Himself under the fire of judgment for you - judgment against your sin, suffering the torment of your hell, being forsaken by His Father, and dying the cursed death you deserve. To trade places with you - the

righteous for the unrighteous - so that you who are not okay be rescued from all that, and instead be healed and *forgiven*. And not just in appearance but in truth. And in that forgiveness put your hope. Not in yourself but in Him. Not in what you do but in what He did, and what He is still doing for you.

For as we heard from Hebrews this morning: ***look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter*** - or, the start to finish - ***of our faith***. That's what all those people in that chapter we heard about again this morning did. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel, those who were stoned, those who were sawn in two, those killed with the sword. God promised them a Saviour, and ***though they did not receive that promise*** - Jesus did not come in their lifetimes - they put their hope in Him who was to come. In His goodness, in His rescue, in His healing, in His forgiveness. And they received all that, by faith. The one in whom they hoped did not let them down. And He will not let you down.

Therefore, Hebrews then tells us, ***since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus*** as they did. Looking not to yourself, not to your family, not to your deeds, but looking to Jesus. Looking to Jesus in the water of baptism which quenches the fire of hell. Looking to Jesus in His Supper which feeds and satisfies those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Looking to Jesus in the healing word of forgiveness, that word which heals the hammer blows of sin and death, and gives us confidence and hope. In Him. That what He has promised He has done and delivered. For them, for us, and for all who put their hope in Him.

And then, *only* then, there is peace. True peace. No matter what divisions or troubles happen in this world and life. For it is the peace of knowing that it is not my holy living that wins the race, but that the sin that disqualifies us has been taken away. And so you and I can now run, can now live, in joy and freedom and confidence. *Not* keeping up appearances, but repenting and washing and eating, receiving the holiness of our brother, Jesus, and being a member of His family. For that is the true peace and prosperity. For when you have Him, then you have everything.

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.