

14 August 2016
Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Saving Us From Ourselves”

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

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

For the past few weeks, we have heard of people coming up to Jesus overly concerned with the things of this world. And Jesus has been teaching them to set their minds on things above. That rather than demanding that an inheritance be given to you, you share what you have with those in need and remember that you have an inheritance in heaven which can never perish, spoil, or fade away, kept there for you by Christ. And instead of being anxious about what you will eat, drink, and wear, remember that you have a Father in heaven providing these things for you. Trust in Him and rely on Him - you don't have to fill you hearts and minds with concerns like these.

You see, sin is always trying to make our world smaller and smaller. To get us to be concerned and obsessed with this thing, with the here and now, with this one problem - for then this one thing, the here and now, and this one problem can grow in size and proportion and become so huge as to begin to push out our faith. So Jesus is always expanding our sight, our horizons. This one thing isn't that important, you know. The here and now will pass, as it always does. And that problem you can't stop thinking and worrying about - your Father in heaven can handle it. Think big, not small. The Lord is the Lord of all time, from the beginning to the end. And He is the Lord of all places and things, for He made them. And the Lord of you and your time. He cares for you.

It is in that context, then, that Jesus speaks the words He speaks today - words that if taken out of context could be quite troubling. You can imagine in this presidential election season, which loves sound bites that put the opponent in the worst possible light, how these words would be used against Jesus. ***I have come to cast fire on the earth. . . . I have not come to bring peace on the earth, but division.*** Jesus is a trouble maker! ***I have come to divide families.*** Jesus the home wrecker! Do you really want Him to be your God? Jesus isn't fit to be the Saviour He says He is!

But as with those other things I've already mentioned from the past few weeks, so too here, Jesus is continuing to expand our sight, our horizons. He's not really against families, but He also doesn't want our family or loved ones to become our idols either. Which sometimes happens. Maybe more often than we think. That father or mother, that sons and daughters, that even boyfriends and girlfriends are put before God. That we seek

to please *them* more than God. That what *they* want determines our actions. That we are more afraid of what *they* think and what they might do more than God. And if that's the case, they have indeed become our gods, our idols. They have become more important than God. They are who we seek to please and serve more than God. And that's not good.

But clearly God is not anti-family - He *created* the family, bringing Eve to Adam in the Garden, giving her to him in the first wedding ceremony, and telling them to be fruitful and multiply - words which bring about the very thing they command.

God promises Abraham a family, even though his wife cannot have children, and He makes it so. And God then protects them in the face of many dangers, preserving their family.

At least three commandments deal with the family and protect the family - the fourth, sixth, and tenth - that we honor our father and mother, love and cherish the spouse given us by God, that we remain faithful to them and sexually pure, and that we not covet one who belongs to another.

And then Jesus Himself honored His parents, submitting to their authority. He raised children from death and gave them back to their grieving parents. And throughout the Scriptures, widows and orphans - those *without* families - are always singled out for special care and protection. God is not anti-family.

But look at what is happening, Jesus says. Look at the storm clouds that are gathering on the horizon. You can do that with the earthly weather, Jesus says. You know how to interpret the signs of nature and know when it's going to rain and when a heat wave is coming. Just think of all the advances that have been made with this in our day and age! Yet even so, even as we have advanced in this, the storm clouds of sin and death, of false belief and idolatry, are not seen. And just as an unforeseen flood can wreak great damage - witness what happened in Ellicott City, just a few miles up the road, a couple of weeks ago - so the unforeseen flood of sin that is surging in our world is a great danger and is wreaking great damage. Our obsession with the things of this world - with our possessions, with our sports, with our technology. Our obsessions with tolerating all beliefs, true or false, as equally valid. Our obsession with sexual freedom turned sexual perversion. Our obsession with me - our ever smaller and smaller focus on me, what I want and desire, what I can get. Me over all. Can't you see the signs?

Yet just as in Jeremiah's day, so today there are a whole lot of false prophets out there crying out *peace*. All is well. Follow your heart. No disaster will come upon you. It's all good.

But it's not all good. ***Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God afar off?*** God said through Jeremiah. Or in other words, am I a small God, and not a God who sees

all, knows all, controls all, created all, and rules all? Sin is making us smaller and smaller, turning us inward and more and more self-centered and self-focused. But God and His Word we heard today would reverse that; would break us out of that ever-shrinking, self-destructive black hole of sin, to see bigger again. And so, God says, ***His Word is like a hammer*** to crush that mindset. ***He is bringing fire on earth*** to burn those sinful impurities out of us. He going to ***divide*** us from our sin and death, in order to unite us with Himself. All of which may be quite painful. If you've ever hit your thumb with a hammer, or been burned by fire, then you know. But if we would just look up for a moment and look out for a moment and see the signs, the ominous signs of the storm of sin, of sin increasing and getting deeper and more entrenched in our lives and in our world, we would know how much we need this. And that a loving God would do nothing less.

But our loving God never does the least - He does *more*, and so something else as well. He doesn't just crush - He crushes in order to build. He doesn't just divide - He divides in order to unite. He doesn't just torch things - He sends fire in order to purify. And He convicts in order to forgive. And He does all these things to break you out of your small, small, self-centered and self-obsessed world to see the greater. A world greater than your world, a life beyond this life, and a family greater than you can imagine. A family of faith that you have been born again into through water and the Word in Holy Baptism. A family of faith that includes all those folks we heard about in Hebrews: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; Moses and Rahab; Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel; and more. A family of faith defined not by blood but by water. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters **who do not share blood with you, but faith with you**. Jesus' opponents - the Pharisees and Sadducees - often relied on the fact that they were *physically* descended from Abraham for the assurance of their salvation. For Jesus, that is a family that needs dividing - so that they identify not just on what family they were born into, but instead what family they were born AGAIN into. With a Father in heaven, and a brother who came to be *their Saviour*.

And yours. He did what we needed and what was required. The Son of God came to be crushed with the hammer of the law because of our sin to build a Church - with Himself as the cornerstone and we as the living stones built upon Him. He came to suffer the fire of God's wrath against our sin, that the fire that now comes upon us purify and not destroy. He came to be divided from His Father on the cross, forsaken for us, to unite us back again with the unity we were created to have. Look up, He says, from your obsessions, from your small, small, world **and see that**. Your God. For you. There. See that and repent that you've been so obsessed and enamored with so much less. Receive His forgiveness and His Spirit, His eyes and His faith, His mercy and compassion and love - His *more!* - and live a new life.

And then, this too: look up and also see your neighbor. You know, the one you've, perhaps, been throwing stones at, or torching with burning words, or dividing yourself

from. And why? For what? Don't you see the signs? The storms of sin, our dying world? Our dying lives? Are you dying for this, when Jesus has died for you? Really?

Therefore, 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, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Looking to Jesus. Not at yourself, not at your stuff, not at your obsessions - at the small stuff. Looking to Jesus. Looking to Jesus who lived and died for you. Looking to Jesus who is at the right hand of God for you. Looking to Jesus who has come and given you new life. Looking to Jesus who is now here for you in His Body and Blood for the strengthening of your faith and the forgiveness of your sins.

And seeing this big picture then enables us to live the small. Better. To live the small in confidence, not worry or fear. To live the small in love, not idolatry. To live the small in service, not selfishness. To live the small - our lives, our families - as a picture, as a foretaste, of what is still to come. In Jesus. In your Saviour. The One who is obsessed *with you*.

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.