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Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“You Cannot, But He Can - And Does”

Text: Luke 14:25-35 (Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Philemon 1-21)

[A gentle re-working of a sermon from yesteryear after some much needed time off . . .]

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

Our world doesn't like extremes, or extremists. When it comes to the weather, we want it neither too hot nor too cold. When it comes to politics, electability means being neither too far left nor too far right. When it comes to schools, give my child homework but not too much homework. Make my job challenging but not too challenging. And even (or maybe especially!) in matters of faith and religion, don't be too much of a zealot. Don't go too far to one side or the other. The middle is better. Because in the middle, you'll offend less people. Think both-and, not either-or. Not one truth but many truths. Not one way but many ways. Not right or wrong but *it depends*. That's the way to go . . . according to the wisdom of the world.

And truthfully, we like being in the middle, too. We like being liked and not offending anyone. It's comfortable, and it's safe. Make my faith demanding but not too demanding. Needing commitment, but not too much commitment. Forgiving but not too forgiving. And Pastor, be relevant but don't hit too close to home! Don't ask too much of me, but don't ask too little. Care, but don't pry. Need me, but not too much.

Which is why today's Gospel is so hard for us to hear. Such lukewarm Christianity is rejected by Jesus. According to His words, there *is* no middle ground. You either are or you aren't. You're in or you're out. You're in Him or you're not. It's the same distinction Moses put before the people in Deuteronomy, just before they were to enter the Promised Land: What's it gonna be folks? Life or death? Blessing or curse? One God or many gods? . . . Well, you know the story. The people said one thing, but then life happened. They found out it wasn't so easy. And so they settled for the mushy middle.

And how often does that happens to us? Truth is, we're the same as they were then, and they're the same as we are now. When you were confirmed or joined the church in some other way, you said you would remain faithful. You promised that you would, *even if it cost your life*. And I have no doubt you meant it, as I did when I spoke those words. . . . And then, like Old Testament Israel, life happens. And we find out it's harder than we thought, to put God before my family; to stand firm and not cave in; to speak and not just

go along with the world's latest truth. It's even harder to put what He wants before what I want - the desires of the flesh I like so much. It's hard to continue to read and learn and pray and trust. We don't want the crosses He gives us. The cost is greater than I thought. The commitment tougher. That kind of life . . . seems impossible.

So some, at that point, give up and move to the opposite extreme, what is sometimes called *cheap grace*. Which is to say, I can't do it, but it doesn't matter because I know Jesus will forgive me anyway. Which is to use God's lavish mercy and love as an excuse . . . for laziness, for sin, for being a CINO - *Christian In Name Only*. And yet we know that's not right either. That's not the way it should be. And so not being able to do the one and knowing we shouldn't do the other, we settle into the mushy middle, where we become anonymous Christians, bored Christians, and neutered, unsalty Christians. *Which is just how satan likes it.*

Jesus knows the danger of this mushy middle ground and how deadly it is, both for us and for those around us. Underestimating the power of sin and the deadly mishmash of truth and error.

So what are we to do? We can't do the one, we shouldn't do the others . . . how do we then live as Christians? As disciples?

Well, the answer is not to live at one extreme or the other, or to mash them together in the middle, **but to live in both extremes at the same time**. That is something quite different than the middle, which tones down and dilutes both the Law of God (His demands) and the Gospel of God (His lavish mercy and love), and stirs them into a mishmash of lukewarm, unrecognizable Christianity that is really no Christianity at all. Instead, to live in *both* extremes is to neither tone down nor tame either the Law or the Gospel, but keeps them both in their strength and truth and purity. To live in the extreme of the **Law** which demands everything from us; and to live in the extreme of the **Gospel** which demands nothing from us. To live in the extreme of the **Law**, which crushes us and brings us to despair of our own efforts; and to live in the extreme of the **Gospel**, which gives us the life and hope and forgiveness we need. Or in other words: to be a Christian takes everything, and it takes nothing.

And where we see this truth displayed for us most vividly is the cross. **The cross which cost Jesus everything**. For Jesus is the One *who counted the cost* to build the tower, fortress, and refuge of the Church, and came to pay that cost in our place. Leaving His throne in Heaven, being born of a virgin, being despised and rejected by men, and then drinking the cup of God's wrath against our sin and dying our death. He is *the King who came to battle* the armies of the prince of this world, asking not for peace, but warring against them and winning the fight we could not win. He is the One *who loved us more than His own life*, and so gave His life that we might live. And His "It is finished" on the cross indicated that it was: all that was necessary, all that was demanded, done. The Law

fulfilled, our sin atoned for, our debt paid, our victory won.

And what cost Him everything, **cost us nothing**. And necessarily so. For if there was something we still have to do, to pay, to supply, to finish, then it was not finished on the cross, and we are still under the demands of the Law, the condemnation of sin, and the curse of death. Then Jesus is only our part-Saviour, and we are back to the mushy middle – and that just will not do.

Because it is finished. We have been saved. We have a Saviour. A Saviour to whom again this morning we confessed: *I cannot be your disciple. I cannot do it. I have not done it. It is too much for me.* And who then said back to us: *Yes, you are quite right. Therefore I forgive you all your sins. What you cannot be, I give to you. It is not too much for me.*

You see, that's the key: discipleship isn't something we choose or do, it's a gift. A gift of forgiveness. A life we are born again, born from above, into. From Adam and Eve, to Abraham and Moses, to David, to the apostles, to you and me today. *All have sinned* - not one excluded - *and fall short of the glory of God*, - and so cannot be His disciple - *and are justified by His grace as a gift*, - given what we cannot do or be - *through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* (Romans 3:23-24).

For you see, Jesus wants all of you, not just part of you. Not just the Church part, or the weekend part, or the morning devotion part, or the spare time part, or the part of your life that you want to give to Him – but all of you, all the time. And so He gave all of Himself, for all of you, that all of you be forgiven. That through His death and resurrection, you be salty salt again. Not re-formed, but re-created. Made new. Taken back to the beginning, to Eden, just as if all that satan, sin, rebellion, and death stuff never happened at all.

That's how great His love for you. That's how great His death for you. And that's how great His baptism for you, where He gives it all to you. His forgiveness, His life, His salvation. All that you need. Nothing held back. Because the Jesus who wants all of you gives all of Himself to you. No partial gifts with Him. No, He is all for you, even also to the eating of His Body and the drinking of His Blood here at this altar. That the life, strength, and forgiveness you need by multiplied unto you. That you be not “all that you can be” – but all that He is. Being the Christian He has made you by His blood.

So don't try to soften the words of Jesus that we heard today. No: *oh, they say this but they mean that*. No! They are hard words because they are meant to crush you, to kill you! – so that Jesus can raise you to a new life. In Him. For that is the only way to be His disciple.

And only then can you live as a disciple of Jesus, following in His way - which is to give all of Himself for others. If you have to do something for yourself, you can't do that. But

if you know you are a child of God, that He has promised you and gives to you all you need, then you can live where God has put you like Jesus - receiving from Him and giving to others. Not loving them above God, but loving God by serving them.

It won't be easy. There are some very tough places in this world, which some of you are in. And maybe, like Onesimus, who we heard about today, you feel like running away from the people and places where God put us. But what did Paul do? He sent Onesimus back. That is where he was to follow Jesus. To love and serve and forgive. And his returning also gave his master Philemon an opportunity to follow Jesus. To love and forgive as well - to live out his calling as a Christian, too.

So where you are right now might not be an easy place. But whatever and wherever your callings, know that your Saviour is using you there in those places - **not because you are able, but because He is**. Because He is working through you to love and serve and forgive, caring for others and providing what they need through you. And in the process, also giving you what you need. For He knows what you need, better than you know what you need. And He has promised to provide.

So while Jesus' words to us today are hard - none of us like being told we are not able to do something - *they are also comforting* - knowing that you do not have to live up to a certain standard to be here, to be Christ's, to be His disciple. **You are here not because you are able** - 'cuz you're not - **but because He is able**. Able to wash you, Body and Blood you, forgive you, and bless you. In the Church that He built, in the war that He won, and the life that He gives to you. All for you.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear . . . the voice of your Saviour. The voice which speaks and it is so. Which gives what we do not have, and creates what is not, still today, still here and now. That you be what you are not and could never be on your own: His disciple. It is the voice that makes all the difference in the world. **And in 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.