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Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Crosses of Love”

Text: Matthew 16:21-28 (Romans 12:9-21; Jeremiah 15:15-21)

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

Jesus must go to the cross, as He said. It must be this way. Not because it is a law or a decree from His Father on high, but because His love will allow Him to do nothing less. His love *for you*. In order to save you, He must go to the cross. For your forgiveness, He must go to the cross. That you have eternal life, He must go to the cross. That you have hope, He must go to the cross.

And yes, this is His doing. Although it was the Jewish leaders - *the elders and chief priests and scribes* - who rebelled against Him and caused Him to *suffer many things and be killed*; to be arrested and tried and flogged and crucified by the Romans, this is His doing. Although others bound Him and pounded Him, hammered the nails and hoisted Him up, it would not have been so had He not allowed it. Had He not willed it to be so. For, as Jesus told His disciples in another place, regarding His life: *No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord* (John 10:17). This is what the Good Shepherd does. He lays down His life for the sheep. It must be so. For the sheep's sake.

So when Peter says no; when Peter rejects the cross, **He is rejecting Jesus' love for Him**. He doesn't know that, of course. He doesn't understand. There are a great many things the disciples wouldn't understand until *after* Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

So perhaps Jesus' rebuke - *Get behind me, Satan!* - is too strong. But He is right. It is satan who wants to stifle God's love. It is satan who wants to stifle the cross. It is satan who wants to stop Jesus. But Jesus will not allow it to be so. He must go, and He will go. That's how great His love for you and for all people. Even for those who put Him there. Even for the one who betrayed Him. Even for those who mocked Him. Even for those who divided His garments. He wanted to save them too. He was there for them - all of them - though they did not know it. *Father, forgive them* (Luke 23:34), He asked from the cross. And He meant it.

And if there is forgiveness for them, there is forgiveness **for you**. There is life for you and hope for you. Jesus has done it. He gives you that forgiveness here every Sunday in the Absolution. He baptized you into His death and resurrection so that you would not

live a life that ends in death, but die a death that ends in resurrection and life. And He feeds you here with that life, with His very own Body and Blood. And His Word is proclaimed to you and lives in you, and with His Word, His Spirit. There is nothing you need that He has not provided and given. All this, for you. Like those in Jesus' day, no matter who you are or what you have done. His gift of love. From heaven, through the cross, to you.

Peter *would* finally get it. It did click in his mind. He finally understood. How do we know? Because he, too, would go to the cross. The words of Jesus that come next became a reality in his life. ***If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.***

Perhaps here is where *we* would speak Peter's words! We wouldn't tell Jesus to avoid His cross. No, we know better. We know the story. We know how it ends and why Jesus did this and had to do this for us. The Gospel! . . . It's here, with *these* words, that we might be tempted to say *no!* To reject the cross in *our* life. To say: *No Lord! This shall never happen to ME!*

But just as with Peter, those too are satan-prompted words. They are the words of the old sinner that lives in us. That wants to indulge myself, not deny myself. That wants what I want, and tries to make what God wants match up with that. That wants to lead, not follow. That wants to be in charge and not let go. That's why kids rebel against their parents, workers against their bosses, pastors against their District Presidents, and all of us against God. It is to love myself first, and then others and God after that, if at all. And a cross? No thank you, God. That just doesn't fit my picture, my plans.

But what Jesus is saying today is that the cross is God's picture. It is His plan. It is how He saves us. And to say no to the cross in our lives is, like Peter, *to say no to His love.* His love which only wants to give us life.

And like for Peter, that's hard for us to understand, right? Because crosses seem about the farthest thing from love and life. For crosses represent hate and suffering and hardship and forsakenness *and death.* . . . But maybe that's the point. Maybe we need to die. Maybe that self-indulgent, prideful, rebellious, I know best, I want to be in charge, ***mind set on the things of man*** sinner in us needs to die, so that *a new man can emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever* (Small Catechism, explanation to Baptism, part 3). So that *a new man can emerge and arise* with a mind set on the things of God. And if so, wouldn't a loving God do nothing less?

So that's why Jesus speaks of our crosses right after speaking of His cross. They are connected. They must be connected. If not, then our crosses really have no meaning. They are just the burdens of an angry or fickle God toying with us, punishing us, or just mad at us. And sadly, that's exactly what some folks think. Maybe even us at times.

Because we either forget the cross of Jesus or it gets buried under the thousand other things going on in this world and in your life. And then maybe we lose sight of God's love for us there. We lose sight of the fact that our sins were already punished there and God's anger poured out in full there. And if it's all on Jesus then it's not on you. And the noise of this world drowns out those loving and life-filled words of Jesus spoken from the cross: *Father, forgive them.*

That's why those words are so important. Those words of forgiveness that teach us about the cross. Those words of forgiveness spoken from the cross, spoken here, and spoken by you. That Jesus' cross not get buried under the troubles or joys of this world, but shine through the gloom of this world, and shine even brighter than the joys of this world. That Jesus and His cross be the light of the world.

And so the crosses a loving God gives you are to save your life, not take it. To cause you to turn to Jesus and His cross in your sin, in your weakness, with your burdens, with your shame, and find the life and love and joy and strength and forgiveness you need. And then to give what you have received to others. That's what Peter did. He went to the cross - literally - and gave his life there, but not for God - God didn't need him to do that - but for others. That the words that he spoke be the words that he lived. His witness of love to the world of the love and forgiveness and life of God for him. Of the love and forgiveness and life that he had received and would continue to receive; and that not even death could stop.

And you too. Just as Jesus bore His cross in love for you, so you, like Peter, can bear your cross in love for others. Because Christ and His Spirit live in you and are transforming you to be like Him.

And what does that look like for you? Think of all those things Paul wrote that we heard today from Romans. About *loving one another, bless those who persecute you, overcome evil with good*, and more - we don't do those things to save ourselves! Jesus and His cross has already done that. We do those things because we *have been* saved. Because we have been set free from having to save ourselves, we can now serve others. Showing them the life of Christ. Laying down our lives for them. Not because it's easy, because it's often hard. And not because it's pleasant, because it's often not. But because that's Jesus living in you. And then Jesus added this too: **that when you lose yourself, your life, like that, you actually find it.** That doesn't mean you save yourself - again, Jesus already did that! It means you actually find what you've been looking for all along. You've just maybe been looking in the wrong places. So Jesus shows us the *right* place.

And so that we might find that life and live that life, our loving God gives us crosses to bear. And I know many of you have some pretty heavy ones right now! But when they seem too heavy, when the world seems too much, remember the words God spoke to Jeremiah that we also heard today: *they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail*

*over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you.*

Those words are just as true for you today as they were for Jeremiah back then. For Jesus is with you to save you and deliver you. In fact, He's going to place Himself into you in just a moment - His Body and Blood, to forgive your sins and give you the life that you need, and the strength to live that life. His strength. For what is too much for you is not too much for Him.

So do not be afraid to give yourself for others. That's Christ in you. That's Christ for you. And you won't run out of life - you have Christ's life! And you cannot out-give Him. And you'll find the life you need, and have. Yes, Lord. Let this be. For me.

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.