25 August 2019 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Pentecost 11 Vienna, VA

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"Disciplined for Holiness"
Text: Hebrews 12:4-29; Luke 13:22-30; Isaiah 66:18-23

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

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

At my father's funeral, my brother, his son, and I all mentioned discipline in our sermons. My nephew talked about something my father had written, which referred to the strap that ended all foolishness in my father's house when he was growing up. I mentioned the leather belt my father sometimes used on my butt, thankful that he loved me enough to discipline me. And my brother said that even though Dad disciplined us like that, he always made sure to tell us he loved us.

Now, the thought of a strap or a leather belt may horrify you. That kind of discipline isn't done much today, if at all. As times change, discipline changes. In the same way, we cringe over how God disciplined Old Testament Israel, and perhaps think what we read in those pages as barbaric. But as times change, discipline changes. The methods change - from armies, to straps and belts, to time outs today. The methods change, but the discipline continues. Because love continues. And the Lord disciplines those he loves.

And the reason for dicipline is to instill a discipline. Discipline isn't just to stop a bad behaviour, but to instill a good one. My father disciplined his children to instill in us the discipline of telling the truth and not lying; to instill in us the discipline of honesty and not stealing; to instill in us the discipline of respect and not dishonoring those around us. And those are good things. At the time, as we heard from Hebrews today, it seemed painful and not good. But looking back, I can see (hopefully) the fruit that it yielded, the good that such training did in my life.

The Lord's discipline, too. We heard today that God disciplines us ***that we may share his holiness***. That's a good reason. God wants to share His holiness with us. He wants to give it to us. The problem is that we keep going after other things that look better to us than holiness. You know what they are for you. I know what they are for me. God knows that those things are not good for us, as my father knew my misbehaving was not good for me. And so His discipline. He treats us as His children. His children that He loves enough to discipline.

But if the goal is that we share His holiness, how is that done? How does God make us holy? There isn't a discipline of holiness - that is something from God, that He shares with us, gives to us. So the discipline that God seeks to instill in us with His discipline is **the discipline of repentance**. The discipline of putting our faith in Him and turning to Him for every needed thing. For if sin is turning away from God and getting for ourselves, then repentance is turning toward God and receiving from Him. Receiving from Him what we need, namely, forgiveness for our sin. The forgiveness that makes us holy again. That is the gift Christ freely gives, through the gifts He freely gives us here (LSB #602). The gift earned for us by Jesus and His cross, His death and resurrection for us.

Which makes the cross the narrow door Jesus was speaking of in the Gospel today. The narrow door through which one is saved. Doing good isn't enough. Stopping sin isn't enough. We have to *receive* a holiness we cannot achieve for ourselves. A holiness only the holy one can give. And wants to give. And so He disciplines us. To instill in us the discipline of repentance, of coming to Him to receive His holiness in the forgiveness of our sins.

You may wonder, though, why this door is narrow. If God loves us, why not make the door wide and easy to get through?

Well, first of all, be thankful that there is a door at all. When Adam and Eve brought sin into the world, it wasn't like a wall had been built between us and God, brick by brick, little by little, sin by sin. It was more like an iron curtain that had suddenly crashed down and divided us from our heavenly Father. But immediately, God made a door in that iron curtain. A cross-shaped door. His love wouldn't let Him wait. He promised them a Saviour. And He disciplined them, too. They would have trials and troubles, that they repent and rely on Him; turn to Him for whatever they needed. And He would provide it. As He always had, so He would continue to do. Even the forgiveness they needed for their life-changing, world-ruining sin. So first of all, be thankful that there is a door for us at all.

But second, understand this too: **narrow isn't a bad thing**. Rather, the door is narrow because God's forgiveness, His salvation, His gifts, aren't given *en masse* - they are given individually. To one sinner at a time. Baptism isn't by fire hose, but one person at a time. The Body and Blood of Jesus are placed into your mouth, one at a time. Even absolution, pronounced here all together, is meant to be heard as your Saviour speaking to you. The individual, private, one-at-a-time absolution extended here as we gather together as one body of Christ here is this place. And so narrow isn't to keep people out, **it is to love them one at a time**. Each person, each individual, loved, forgiven, cared for, died for.

The Gospel today mentions Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Individuals, who God spoke to individually. And perhaps you wish God would speak to you in the same way. Well, He

has. You've heard Him. I baptize you. You, take and eat. I forgive you. You, My child. And though you be last in the eyes of the world, despised, neglected, mocked, ignored, you are first in His eyes. Whether you come from the east or west, the north or south. There is a spot at the table in the kingdom of God for you.

So ***strive to enter through the narrow door***, Jesus said. The word there in the Greek for strive is a good one: *agonizomai*. Agonize. It's used in other verses for struggle, fighting, or the agony of an athlete. Or in other words, it's not easy. For repentance is not easy. You will struggle against many temptations to sin. You will fight your own urges and desires. To pray and repent every day, to come here and repent every week, is like an athlete in training that wakes up every day at 5 am to work out. *Agonizomai*. Agony. But in the end, worth it. Or is your sin worth getting shut out of heaven for? Is getting what you want now worth going to hell for? So your Father disciplines you, to instill in you the discipline of repentance, that He share His holiness with you. For He loves you.

But maybe what makes such repentance a little easier is again what we heard in the reading from Hebrews. For when you pray and repent, when you come here and repent, you are not coming to a fearsome God, a punishing God, a God you must cower before and beg for a forgiveness you do not know if you will receive or not. No, you are coming to Mount Zion. And Mount Zion is the place of God's grace poured out for you. It is the place of innumerable angels is festal - joyful - gathering. To join with those who have already passed through death to heaven and the presence of God. It is the place where Jesus, your mediator, is. And whose blood poured *out* for you, poured *on* you in the water of baptism, and poured *into* you with the wine of His Supper, cries out not for vengenace, but for your forgiveness. For your every sin. And it is so. You are holied.

And if you're still not so sure about that, look again to the cross. Look at the blood of Jesus there, and hear what Jesus cries out there. He does not cry out for venegance, but for your forgiveness. For that's why He's there. As mediator. Taking your sin and unholiness and giving you His forgiveness and holiness. So that when the time comes, as Isaiah spoke about, to gather all nations and tongues on the Last Day, you will sing the praises of Him who did such great things for you. For yes, He knows you. You are the one He baptized. You are the one He forgave. You are the one He fed. You are the one who prayed: *Lord, have mercy!* And though He disciplines you now, for a while, for your good, and though you struggle now, you will recline at His table in the kingdom. And when you do, the discipline, the struggle, the agony of death, will not even be a distant memory. They will be gone. Along with your sin. And all there will be is joy - the joy of being in the presence of God, and His joy in you, His child. And you'll be home - at last, and forever.

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.