

25 February 2024
Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Lot, not the Little”

Text: Mark 8:27-38; Romans 5:1-11

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

Who do people say that I am?
But who do you say that I am?

I think that is usually the contrast that catches the attention of most people from the Holy Gospel we heard this morning. The difference between what the **crowds** are saying about Jesus and what the **disciples** are confessing about Jesus. The **crowds** clearly hold Jesus in high regard. **John the Baptist** and **Elijah** are pretty good company! He’s a prophet, a man of God who speaks the Word of God. And no small one at that. But the **disciples** know Jesus is even more than that. **He is the Christ**. The Saviour promised to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses, Joshua, and Samuel, to David and Solomon, and more. Jesus is the very Son of God in human flesh. In a category all His own.

I think that is usually the contrast that catches our attention because it is still the case in our day and age. People think different things about Jesus. And while we, following in the footsteps of Peter and the other disciples, confess Jesus to be *the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Matthew 16:16), many today do not. Prophet, good man, teacher, charlatan, are some of the answers today.

But I wonder if that’s really the right contrast for us to consider today, and especially in this season of Lent - this season of self-examination and repentance. Perhaps better for us to think about today is a *different* contrast we heard: **the contrast between the two statements of Peter**, when Peter first confessed Jesus to be the Christ, but then denied that Jesus would go to the cross. That might be a better place for us to look today, and instead of patting ourselves on the back for not being like the world and giving their answers, consider how we might be like Peter. One moment confessing and the next denying. **Wanting a cross-less Christ**.

Jesus was pretty tough on Peter for that! Calling him satan and wrong-headed for what he said. But strong love demands strong words. And this was no small objection Peter raised, but one that cut right to the heart of what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. For no cross, no Christ. No cross, no Saviour. No cross, only hell in your future. So the cross is not just something Jesus could do or not do; it is bound up with who He is. For without the cross, Jesus is reduced to what the crowds thought of Him; He is just another prophet, great as that

may be. The cross is what separates Jesus from all others. He is not just the *greatest* prophet or the *mightiest* prophet, but **the dying and rising prophet**. This is what must happen, Jesus says. And that's a strong word: **must**. It means there is no other way, no other alternative. It has to be this way. For Jesus to be the Christ, for Jesus to save us, He must be killed. So Peter's rebuke needs to be rebuked. *Strongly*.

And then Jesus doubles down. Just as there is no cross-less Christ, so **there are no cross-less Christians**. Anyone who would come after Jesus, be a disciple of Jesus or a follower of Jesus, for you, too, there is a cross. ***For whoever would save his life (by being cross-less) will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.***

Now, what does that mean? Some think that to ***take up your cross*** means that you will suffer. And maybe you will. There's a lot of suffering in our world - for Christians and non-Christians alike. So suffering doesn't separate us from others, though maybe *the reason* for suffering does. Maybe you will suffer exactly because you confess Jesus as your Saviour, and the only Saviour of the world. Maybe that suffering will be mild, like ridicule, or being made fun of. Maybe it will be a little more intense, like losing your job or being sued. Or maybe it will be as a martyr, actually losing your life because of your faith. That has happened in every century, and isn't going to stop.

That's closer to the meaning of the cross than just suffering. Because if you were carrying a cross in Jesus' day, when Jesus spoke those words, that meant only one thing: **that cross you were carrying was soon going to be carrying you!** You were soon going to be dead. That's what crosses were for. Pain, yes. Suffering, yes. But death, finally.

So . . . *Jesus wants you to die?* I thought Jesus came to suffer so we wouldn't have to! That Jesus came to die so we wouldn't have to! Right?

Do you see? That's the trap Peter was falling into. He wanted a cross-less Christ and **we want to be cross-less Christians**. Now, that needs unpacking. Because Jesus on the cross, we get. Unlike Peter when Jesus spoke those words, we know that part. Check. We won't be rebuking Jesus for that. But do we rebuke . . . or complain or grumble . . . at God when things don't go right in our own lives? When there are crosses we have to bear? Rare, indeed, is the Christian who has never done that. So rare, I would say, that they do not exist.

So yes, Jesus wants you to die. *In order to save you*. But again, what does that mean? Well, Jesus helps us out as He goes on to explain, contrasting our life in this world (which doesn't last) with the life of eternity, saying: ***what does it profit a man to gain the whole world (have everything you want here and now) and forfeit his life (his eternal life)?*** Of course, that sounds silly. Who would take a little bit of life when you could have a lot? Who would take only one dollar if you were offered millions? But is that exactly what we do? When we live for this life, and the things of this world, and forget or neglect the things that give eternal life? When what I want comes before what God wants? When what makes me happy becomes the measure of all things? When my wisdom and thinking take the place of God's

Word as the guide to my life? Rare, indeed, is the Christian who could deny that . . .

To do those things puts us in a dangerous place, turning away from God and His Word and setting our hearts on a person, thing, accomplishment, or status in this world. A person, thing, accomplishment, or status that will not last, that cannot last, just as we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

We need a loving God to rebuke us for that, for not just *wanting* to be but *trying* to be cross-less Christians. We need to be rebuked like Peter, so that we will repent and turn back to Jesus and His Word and His ways.

So to that end, our loving God gives us crosses to bear. Crosses not just to make us suffer, but to kill that old, sinful, selfish, rebellious, foolish man or woman in us that grabs for **the little** instead of **the lot**. The cross is to kill that old man in me so that a new man can arise and live. A Jesus man. With eyes fixed on **Jesus** and on **the lot**, on the eternal, on that life not even death can end. And such crosses are not few, but in every vocation, every calling in life you have. The husband laying down his life for his bride. I don't want to do that! I want what I want! But I am called to give up my selfishness, to kill it, for my wife, to put her before me. Or the child obeying her parents. She doesn't want to do that! She wants to be free and do what she wants! But her parents are there for her good. So that rebellion needs to be crucified and slain, for her good. Maybe your co-worker or classmate or brother or sister drives you crazy and you want to lash out at them - don't. Love your neighbor. And I could go, and maybe you have your own ideas and examples of crosses bouncing around in your mind.

And what makes this so hard is that those people we are called to love and serve *are sinners!* Husbands, wives, parents, children, family - *they're sinners!* They're wrong! They sin against me! So I need to do what I need to do! How else am I going to get what's I deserve? How else am I going to get ahead? How else am I going to . . . save . . . my life? Oh.

Here's the good news: you already have someone who saved your life! Jesus. You don't need to. And He promised to provide all you need. He didn't promise it would be easy, but He did promise to provide. And what Jesus provides is never a little, but always the whole lot. So why turn away from that to save a little now? A little pleasure, a little pride, a little satisfaction, a little life? Is it really worth it?

And here's more good news: you not only have someone who already saved your life, but saved your life while you were *the sinner* - the one who didn't deserve it. For, Saint Paul said, as we heard earlier, *maybe someone would lay down their life for a righteous person or a good person*. Like, if my husband, if my wife, if my brother or sister was perfect (or, at least, not so much of a sinner!), they'd be so much easier to love! I'd be willing to sacrifice then, right? **But**, Paul says, **God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us**. That means while we were *enemies* of God, Paul goes on to say. Christ

died to make enemies, friends; to make strangers, family; to make sinners, saints.

That's what Jesus - **the Christ of the cross** - has done for you. He took up His cross to save you, Peter, and to save you, O Christian. And when you were baptized, that's the new life you received as you were joined to Jesus in His death and resurrection. Slaying the old sinner and raising up a new man or woman, a Christ-man or woman. In baptism, Jesus made you friend, family, saint. Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit in you (just like Peter!), and you renounced the devil and all his works and all his ways, confessing Jesus to be the Christ. But as we continue to sin, that needs to continue. Each day. **As Christians of the cross**. Each day repenting. Each day putting that old man or woman back on the cross. Each day rising in forgiveness and living a new life. Setting our minds on the things of God, not the things of man, of this world. Setting our minds on **the lot** (of eternity), not **the little** (of this world).

And this Supper here helps us do that as well. Lift up your hearts! we are told. We sing with the angels and archangels and all the company not just of earth but of heaven. We eat and drink the Body and Blood of the Lamb of God. Your sins are forgiven. You are friend, family, saint. **So what looks so little is really the lot**. Here is the Body and Blood of the cross, to enable you to bear your cross as well. That losing your life you gain your life, the life of Christ.

A cross-less Christ can't do that. A cross-less Christian won't do that. **But with the cross, there is life**. *What a sentence that is!* With the cross, an object of death, there is life! Because of Jesus. Who transformed it. Who by His death destroyed death, and by His glorious resurrection, opened the kingdom of heaven to us.

So who do you say Jesus is? It's an important question. He is the Christ. He is the crucified. He is, as John says, the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). He is **the lot**. So don't let satan get you to settle for less.

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.