

29 June 2025
Commemoration of Saints Peter and Paul

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Just Jesus”

Text: Acts 15:1-12; Galatians 2:1-10; Matthew 16:13-19

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

Peter and Paul. What an unlikely pair! Peter, a smelly fisherman, and Paul, a radical persecutor of the Church. Jesus makes some strange choices, doesn't He? And not just with them. I mean, look around here, too! I'm not going to throw anyone under the bus, but we've got some unlikely Christians, eccentric personalities, and just plain hard-boiled, dyed-in-the-wool sinners! And yet here you are. All confessing your sins together - no one better or worse than another. All confessing the Creed together. And not because you're so smart and thought of it - but because like Peter, this was revealed to you by our Father who is in heaven. And all receiving the gifts of God together. Because we need them, and can never get enough of them. Jesus brought us together here in mercy, to mercy us. Just as He did Peter and Paul.

They're commemorated together on this day, even though they are both also commemorated separately. The Conversion of St. Paul and the Confession of St. Peter are celebrated just a week apart every January. So this is unusual and special. For besides Jesus, John the Baptist is the only other person who gets more than one day in the Church calendar. So it's a pretty exclusive club.

So why? Why commemorate Peter and Paul together on this day, when we've already remembered them separately? Well, because **it's not what makes them different that makes them special, but what makes them the same**. And what makes them the same is what they preached. That Jesus is the Saviour of Jews and Gentiles alike. That Jesus has saved us 100% - there is nothing you can do, nothing you can add, to His work of saving you. And that this must be proclaimed to all people. Not Jesus AND something. Not Jesus PLUS something. *Just Jesus*. He did it **all**, and for **all** people. No matter who they are.

But there are people who disagree with that, and say *just Jesus* is not enough. You must do something, too. Peter and Paul joined forces against that at the very first Church council, which we heard of in the First Reading today. There were some saying that to be saved, Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. **No!** Peter said. **No!** Paul said. We are **all** saved by grace through faith. Salvation is a

free gift. You cannot add to it. To do so is deadly. To the gift, and to you.

This is all not an easy lesson to learn, though, and really, *quite humbling*. *Can't, stop, don't* - those are words we don't like and don't want to hear. Tell me I *can't* have something and watch me! I'll find a way! Challenge accepted. I'm special. Tell me *stop* and . . . who are you to tell me what to do! I'm in charge. I'll do what I want. The rules don't apply to me. And *don't* is just an invitation to *do*.

But when it comes to Jesus, there's no other way. Jew, Gentile, slave, free, man, woman, rich, poor, young, old - there is no distinction, and no exceptions. Even though we want there to be . . .

It's true. We want there to be *something* special about us, *something* in us that separates us from others, *something* that makes us different, noteworthy. But there's not. Among men? Oh, yes! There is. That *is* how it works. But before God, no. Before God, there is only one kind of person: sinner. All of us. And while we look at each other and smell each other and make judgments about who's a really bad sinner and who's not such a bad sinner - God does not. To Him, we all stink. Period. Fathers, mothers, children, pastors. Even Peter and Paul.

Which is humbling. For think of the worst sinner you can think of. I mean, really bad. I mean, the worst of the worst. And to learn to say: *I'm no better*. And mean it? That's hard. And humbling.

But then, and only then, can you begin to realize how great the grace of God is! And what good news this is. That God chose you and me not because *we're* so special, **but because HE IS**. Because He is the Saviour of sinners. Because He is the lover of the loveless. Because He is the rescuer of the down and out. Because He is the helper of the helpless. HE makes you great. HE makes you special. HE makes you a child of God.

Peter and Paul both chafed at that for a while . . . until they realized what good news this is. What good news *just Jesus* is. So when others tried to add to *just Jesus*, tried to say that *something* must come from us, Peter and Paul shut them up and shut them down. They wouldn't let anyone take this good news away from them, and not from those they were sent to and preached to. This was far too important.

And so, too, in our day and age. Humble is hard. But once you're there with Jesus, there's nothing better. Circumcision had its day. The Law of Moses had its day. But they were only pointers to *just Jesus*; preparing for Jesus. And now that Jesus has come, there's no going back. There's nothing to go back to!

Jesus said that once. Probably more than once, but He said: *No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God* (Luke 9:62). So don't do it! Don't look back at your old sins and dwell on them. Jesus died for them and forgave them. They're gone! Don't dredge them back up and think you must do something about them to make up for them and be worthy. But also don't look back to see what good things you've done that make you worthy or that separate you from others. Thinking like that doesn't make you fit for the kingdom of God. Don't look back. Look at Jesus. Look at His cross. If you want to see your sins, look *there* - *there* they are! Jesus did something about them, paid for them. If you want to look at your good works, look *there* and see how they measure up compared to that! Look at the cross and just say: thanks be to God! Thanks be to God that Jesus did *that* for me!

That's what Peter and Paul learned. What did Paul once say? Everything he thought was so great about himself - His pedigree, His deeds, His learning, His position . . . once He got a glimpse of Jesus, he took another look and he realized: it's nothing! *It's all rubbish* (Philippians 3:8)! How could I have been so stupid? How could I have thought all this, all that I did, was worth *anything*, when Jesus did so much for me? Holy moly. And Peter, too. He got nuthin' apart from Jesus. But *just Jesus* is not just something, it's everything.

So the Gentiles? Well if it's *just Jesus* for Peter and it's *just Jesus* for Paul, then it's *just Jesus* for them, too! And for us. *Just Jesus* at the Font. *Just Jesus* in the Word. *Just Jesus* on the altar. *Just Jesus* everyday. The good days and the bad days. And as you know, there are plenty of bad days in this life! Plenty of days when you wish you hadn't gotten out of bed, or can't wait to crawl into bed! Days when you wonder if it's all worth it, if you make any difference at all.

Peter and Paul had days like that, too. Most of the stories we read about them are the good stuff, the good days, the success stories. But sometimes I think Peter's foot spent more time in his mouth than his tongue! And when both verbal stones and physical rocks were raining down on Paul, he had to wonder . . .

But then . . . *just Jesus*. It wasn't about them or what happened to them. It was *just Jesus*. It was all about Jesus and what happened to *Him*. His words, His life, His death and resurrection, His promises. And that gets you through the bad days. When everyone else is unfaithful, Jesus remains faithful. When everyone else leaves, Jesus stays. When everyone else is just in it for themselves, Jesus is in it *for you*.

This *just Jesus* is what many of us had this past week at *Higher Things*. Not that it was an easy week. We had problems. We had disagreements. Chaperones had to raise their voices a time or two. A certain Pastor had to yell and bark orders. It was hot. Really hot! But it was also a week of *just Jesus*. *Just Jesus* everyday in Matins,

Vespers, Evening Prayer, and Compline. *Just Jesus* in Divine Services to start and end the Conference. *Just Jesus* in the plenaries and breakaways. *Just Jesus* in new friends made. *Just Jesus* everyday, no matter how challenging the day. And it was great.

But then we come home . . . and what happened to *just Jesus*? It was such a great week, but now back to real life, right? To problems, sadness, challenges, busyness. But *just Jesus* doesn't stay behind in Amherst, Massachusetts. It's *just Jesus* here, too. For us. With us. Everyday. *Higher Things* isn't just one week a year of *just Jesus*, but one week a year to teach us how to make everyday *just Jesus*. And for us who went to teach you.

Which, to bring this full circle, is what Peter and Paul did. They had their *Higher Things* weeks, too. Peter gets called to be a disciple and Paul had his conversion experience. But then they had to go on, back to work, back to problem people, back to difficult situations - **and take *just Jesus* with them into those places and for those people**. So there can be *just Jesus* for them, too. And they insisted on it! Something else? More than Jesus? NO! *Just Jesus*. That's everything.

So now for you. Come get *just Jesus* now. His Body and Blood here *for you*. With His forgiveness for your sins. His strength for your weakness. His life for all those times you think you just can't go on. You can. *Just Jesus*. For Peter, for Paul, and for 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.