

Matthew 10:34–42

Jer. 28:5–9; Psalms 119:153–160 (v. 154) & 46 (v. 11); Romans 7:1–13

2 July 2023 - Our Savior Lutheran Church in Westminister, MA

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GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST! The text is the continuation of the Holy Gospel from last week, from Matthew 10.

It's been wonderful getting a chance to see family and friends again, to be here, where Marta and I grew up and fell in love, to show the kids where I proposed to their mother down at Pineshore, to see my childhood home in Hubbardston—dilapidated and, against all odds, still standing. I'm reminded of God's incredible providence and grace that is so undeniably free, that it's in our nature to miss it or regard it as impossible. When the memories come flooding in, it's not just nostalgia, looking to the past and longing to *have* it all back—like some kind of strange second chance. It's looking back and remembering, as if for the first time, what lies ahead, what you've been longing for your whole life. C.S. Lewis called that being “surprised by joy.”

What I see here in this place, despite all the battle scars we've suffered personally, despite the real sorrow of losing those whom the enemy snatched away and the bittersweet sorrow of those who've fallen asleep, who've already flown away to their Rest...despite all that, I see grace upon grace and the power of God's forgiveness washing away every stain of sin, and returning us again and again to innocence, so that we can love as those who have been so dearly loved.

We were made to live in a blessed, holy communion, as one in Christ, and in Christ all of us with God. And Jesus came to do it, to break down the walls of hostility and to declare our independence from sin and death and unite humanity from the four corners of the earth by His own blood. If America only knew the freedom of that “sweet and blessed country” where our citizenship is!

That is why the words of Jesus to us this morning are hard to bear. Are they not? I mean we're gearing up to celebrate our nation's Independence Day, to gather with family for cookouts and fireworks, with children's sticky hands and swimming, and give thanks to God for this land and this freedom, however temporary, and, maybe like me, you'll see some family that you haven't seen in awhile. And then our Lord tosses a wet blanket on the party: “DON'T SUPPOSE THAT I CAME TO CAST PEACE ON THE EARTH. I DIDN'T COME TO CAST PEACE, BUT A SWORD, TO DIVIDE A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW. A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS OWN HOUSE.

Taken at face value, it contradicts everything we know about the Prince of Peace and the God who by virtue of His incarnation made peace with God and man in His own incomprehensible person: **“God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of His mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching His Godhead and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood. Who, although he is God and Man, yet He is not two but one Christ.”** And the One who made peace with God and man in His own person, is the same One who has redeemed, restored, and united all things in Himself by MAKING PEACE BY THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS. St. Paul says it this way: THEREFORE, SINCE WE HAVE BEEN JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

But this morning, it's not PEACE, at least not the way that we think of peace. He's not talking about peace by way of compromise or going with the flow or ignoring the truth. He says, “I've thrown a sword into this world TO DIVIDE. What does He mean? Well, first, it's to clear up any misconception that we might've had about Him. The world for sure, but even Christians, can easily imagine that God is merciful in the way that we think mercy should be doled out. The world and our own nature wants to turn forgiveness into acceptance (even acceptance of sin!) and grace and mercy are just good excuses to get back to the earth-bent and selfish life that we'd been living before Christ called us. The Gospel becomes something altogether different. It's not that Christ died to take away sin, but that Christ died to make you feel better about your sin, so that you'd be comfortable being you. That's the kind of accepting Jesus the world wants.

But Christ, the Lord, says, “I've come to divide, TO KILL AND MAKE ALIVE.” Not because He hates family. He made family. Every last member of your household from conception to the grave is a soul that Jesus has LONGED TO GATHER LIKE A MOTHER HEN GATHERS HER BROOD. And yet He says, “I've come to divide,” because He knows what can take your heart from Him. He came to set you apart from the most precious thing that will take you away from Him, to divorce us from whatever we are tempted to love more than Him. Sometimes that's family and sometimes that our passions and sometimes that's our own righteousness according to the Law. That's why St. Paul says: “MY BROTHERS, YOU ALSO HAVE DIED TO THE LAW THROUGH THE BODY OF CHRIST, SO THAT YOU MAY BELONG TO ANOTHER, TO HIM WHO HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD, IN ORDER THAT WE MAY BEAR FRUIT FOR GOD. You're no longer of the flesh and enslaved to the Law. You have married another. If you are alive to God in Christ, you are dead to sin. If you are baptized into His name, you are not your own. YOU WERE BOUGHT FOR A PRICE. And God the Father knows how much you cost.

Notice, however, the subtlety. He's not talking to prostitutes and tax collectors here. He's not talking about sinners whom even the world knows. I mean those whose sins have brought about some real sadness in this world,

who've been enslaved by the lower passions of greed, or lust, or addiction that bubble up. Even reason tells us that there's nothing to be gained by following your flesh, not really. Drugs and booze don't really make you happy and neither does speed dating. Don't get me wrong, Christ has come to cleanse any of us who've fallen into the world headlong and been enslaved by our passions: money, pornography, whatever. But Christ is talking here to sophisticated sinners. That is, He came to save the ones who seem to have it all together, whose love appears to be noble, the ones who've loved family, even the ones that are really hard to love, who've loved the ones that God Himself gave us: father, mother, brother, sister, children. We say, "How could Christ come to divide us from them?"

Whether it's money, or fame, or creature comforts, or your own family, thus says the Lord: "YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS" and "I, THE LORD YOUR GOD, AM A JEALOUS GOD." It's because He knows us, and He knows how quick we are to compromise and make peace, whatever the terms, ready at the signs of any discomfort turn from heaven to find peace on earth.

That's why He brings division between anything that would turn us from Him and His word. But He never said, "Cut yourself off from them." Where would we be if Christians had cut themselves off from us? The Holy Spirit only comes through the Word and Sacraments that only Christians *have*. No, Jesus says, "Love them more than you ever did! *But*, COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND BE SEPARATE. LOVE THEM! But FOLLOW ME. How will we ever lead them to Jesus and out of bondage if we don't set out from Egypt ourselves or if we keep trying to get back.

People we care about will tell us, "We're not AGAINST *you*. If you'd just come back; if you'd just be the way you were, live the way *we* live, talk the way you used to, there wouldn't *be* any DIVISION at all." And they're right. And the Roman officials were perfectly sincere when they told us, "If you'd just burn a little incense to Caesar, there'd be nothing to divide us." And they were right. And those first Christians had friends and family who watched and cried out, "Oh, please! Just compromise a little, and everything'll be the way it used to be!" And they were right. But it's the kind of nostalgia that leads to destruction. If we cross *back* to where we came from, WHAT WILL IT PROFIT A MAN IF HE GAINS his WHOLE family AND LOSES HIS OWN SOUL? Who's going to call them in from the storm, if we don't have shelter ourselves?

So be careful of what you do for the sake of peace. I mean, you've got family or friends staying over and they don't believe in Christ and don't pray, so, even though Jesus commanded you to pray and to remain in His word, you leave it off for the visit, you know, for the sake of peace. Or your business partners or your friends really wouldn't *understand* why you can't do...whatever, or why you've got to do this other thing that Jesus commands, because they're in the dark, so, even though Jesus tells you, "YOU'VE BEEN WASHED; YOU'VE BEEN REBORN," you go along, for the sake of peace. Or your son or your daughter wants to do what

people do who are still DEAD IN TRANSGRESSIONS, even to the point of refusing to come and worship the only Savior they've got, even though the Holy Spirit baptized them and put them in your hands, you let it go, for the sake of peace, or so you thought. But for the sake of *whose* peace?

I know it gets awkward and I know it means division. But, Beloved, CONSIDER JESUS WHO ENDURED SO MUCH OPPOSITION FROM SINNERS; CONSIDER JESUS WHO ENDURED SUCH OPPOSITION from us, until at last we received the Spirit. Consider Jesus who was divided for the sake of the many. So often we've tried to SAVE OUR LIVES or the lives of others. But we are not our Savior and we are not theirs. He is! He was the one who'd be put OUTSIDE THE CAMP, crucified with a lot of sinners, and bearing every sin as if He was the only one who'd ever sinned. He was divided and set apart. "I'M THE ONE YOU WANT; LET THESE OTHERS GO." And I know He said it to the mob of soldiers, but He might as well have said to His Father, whose wrath would be poured out on Him alone. "TAKE ME; LET THESE little ones go.

He told us: "WHOEVER FINDS HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND WHOEVER LOSES HIS LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT." But it's not just a nice sentiment. He showed by giving His life. Those were the Father's terms of peace. And He did the Father's will and WAS CUT OFF FROM THE LAND OF THE LIVING, and took the punishment of our sin on His own body. So whoever's been losing their life to sin, stupid sins of laziness and lovelessness, and subtle sins of pride and self-deceit...HE lost His life, so that you'd find it. HE WHO KNEW NO SIN BECAME SIN, SO THAT IN HIM WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD... and HAVE PEACE WITH GOD.

For Jesus' sake
Don't you see ~~that~~ ^{life} is ours now? In Him we are already seated in the heavenly places, so that we might here and now lose our lives for others, that we might spend and be spent as He was, ^{or ourselves} to give our lives as a living sacrifice, not to redeem the enemies of our own house, but to point them to the One who already has. It may hurt to see the division. It might leave scars. But that's nothing to the crown of life that is waiting for you and me, and for the sake of Jesus, them.

In Jesus' Name + Amen.