

Dear Friends in Christ,

In last Sunday's Gospel Lesson we saw that Jesus divided the twelve disciples into teams of two each. Jesus then sent them out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus wants the disciples to get some experience proclaiming the Gospel. He has given them signs so that people will know that they are from God. He has given them a specific message to proclaim. They are almost ready. Jesus has just one more thing to teach them before they leave. He wants them to know about the response they will receive after they proclaim the message.

The response Jesus tells the disciples to expect SEEMS totally wrong. It doesn't seem to make sense. Jesus warned the disciples with words like, "Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. This doesn't seem right.

To help you understand why this seems so wrong, let's take a few moments to imagine other scenarios of extreme need. Imagine a hurricane with a path of destruction that is miles wide. A team shows up with trucks carrying food, shelter, water, clothing, and so forth. The victims of the storm would have nothing but thanks for these kind people. News media would broadcast from the site of the destruction and praise the work of these rescuers. That is what we would expect.

Or here is a real historical example. Up until the middle of the twentieth century many of the diseases that we now take in stride meant death or loss of limb. Ear infections would leave people deaf. Pneumonia was fatal. Surgeons would often operate successfully only to have patients die of infection. Then Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin. Two other men, Ernst Chain and Howard Florey read about Fleming's work and developed ways to mass produce penicillin and make it available to the world at a relatively low price. In 1945, these three men shared the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. Once again, we see that the world honored them for their achievement.

I am sure that most of you know other examples of serious problems that were solved by dedicated teams of people. You can also relate how people responded in gratitude to these solutions. You expect people to be grateful when they have a problem, and someone solves it.

Now consider the problem that Jesus solves. The order of Baptism in Lutheran Service Book tells us what the problem is:

We are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation.

Did you hear the problem in those words? Lost forever means an eternity of suffering in hell. This is the most serious problem of humanity.

Jesus is the solution to the problem of eternal punishment. He is the Savior of all mankind. He is the Son of God who took humanity into Himself so that He could take our place and earn salvation for us. He lived a perfect life and then suffered the eternal punishment we deserved as He hung on a cross for us. In this way, He paid the dreadful price of sin so that we could have salvation for free ... not just cheap, but free. Then He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Now He offers His salvation to all people by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

When you hear this, you realize that Jesus makes us aware of our greatest problem and He provides the greatest solution for free. You would think that the entire world would honor Him above all others. That is what you would think, but the reality is just the opposite.

This hatred does not make sense to us Christians. After all, we are telling people that Christ has already purchased their salvation with His death on the cross. We are telling them that He gives this salvation to them for free! We are telling them that the Christ has purchased a gift that is worth more than the wealth of all nations and He is giving it away for free. Nevertheless, the proclamation of this gift makes people angry. This just doesn't make sense.

If Jesus had not given us the warning in today's Gospel, sharing the Good News of salvation would be a very confusing activity. It would be easy to think that we were doing something wrong when people did not eagerly desire to receive this gift when we told them about it. It would be easy to think that we were doing something wrong when people actually challenge us and fight against us when all we want to do is tell them about a gift that is more valuable than all the riches contained in the world. You would think that people would fill this building and line up around the block and down the street in order to get this gift, but they don't. They persecute it instead. Why!

Well, there is something fundamentally different about the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ. There is a spiritual war going on all around us. While we are proclaiming the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, sin, death, and the devil are fighting a war of lies against that proclamation. They are doing everything within their power to make truth look like a lie and to

make lies look like the truth. Although sin, death, and the devil want to enslave us, they present themselves as a way to freedom. Although true freedom is in Christ Jesus, the forces of evil proclaim Christ as restrictive and domineering. The forces of sin, death, and the devil are the ultimate con artists. They pose as friends but are really deadly enemies.

Today's Gospel is a great comfort for persecuted Christians around the world. It tells us that the opposition of the world is no surprise to God. God is not up in heaven saying, "O My! The world is persecuting My people. Whatever will I do?" No! God knows all about our situation. He understands that the world makes it hard to be a Christian. He understands that His faithful confessors will undergo hard times. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: [1 Corinthians 1:23] "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."

Today's Gospel is one of many places in Scripture that tell us to expect opposition from the world. Today's Gospel tells us that we are not doing something wrong when the world or even our own family hates us for making a faithful confession of Jesus Christ.

Even with the knowledge that God understands, though, it is still hard to stand firm in the face of criticism. The temptation is always there for us to compromise God's teachings in order to get along with the world. If the world gets offended because the Bible says that all are sinners, we might be tempted to water down the message of sin – perhaps even skip it altogether. If the world is offended by the gruesome nature of the cross, we may want to push the cruel torture and the pain of the cross into the background. It is easy to talk about God's love and forget about His justice. It is easy to talk about Jesus as our buddy and forget about the day when He will come as the judge of all people. We often want to water down the message of God's Word just a little bit so that the world around us would not give us such a hard time.

Jesus warns that this attitude is very dangerous. He said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." The worst thing that this world can do to us is end our physical life. But this world is not all that there is. There is a judge who has the authority and power to send both soul and body to the eternal punishment of hell. It is His teachings that we are watering down when we compromise what we believe and confess in order to fare better in this world. It is His name we are blaspheming when we give way, even a little bit, to the doctrines of this world.

So, have you stood firm in the faith even in the face of the world's ridicule and persecution? No? Neither have I. I must confess that in spite of my desire to remain faithful to the teachings of God's Word, I find that I am guilty of compromising my profession of faith. Once again, the Law convicts with a standard of perfection that is so high that no mere human could ever keep it. Once again, the Law shows our sin to us and shows us our need for a Savior.

That is the reason that the Gospel is so sweet to those who believe. The Gospel proclaims that Jesus is the only one who never compromised God's Word. He is the only one who remained faithful to His calling. He remained faithful to His calling even when His calling led Him to the cross. He is the one who paid for our sins – even our sins of watered-down doctrine – with his death on the cross. He faced not only the persecution of this world, but He also faced the combined guilt of all the sin of this world. Even then He remained faithful. With the victory He won with His death on the cross, He has purchased the forgiveness of sins for all people.

Jesus warned the disciples to remain faithful. Even so, the disciples all abandoned Jesus. At one point Peter even denied that He knew Jesus. In spite of their weak confession, Jesus took them all back.

The history of the early church tells us of the faithful Apostles. Of the eleven apostles who remained faithful to Jesus, only John the Evangelist died of natural causes. The other ten Apostles died as martyrs to their faith in Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they persevered to the end.

In spite of our many shortcomings – in spite of our fear – in spite of our desire to get along with the world at the expense of Christ's teachings, the Holy Spirit will continue to keep us in the faith. Just as the Apostles endured to the end by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will one day bring us to a blessed end here on this earth – only to take us to a blessed eternity in heaven. There we shall wait with all the other believers in Christ until the Last Day when Jesus will return and raise all the dead, and all who believe in Him will live forever with Jesus on a new earth where there is no sin, no sorrow, and no persecution. For we shall live in that place of perfect peace and love forever because Jesus has already broken the chains that bind us and forgiven all our sins. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.