Homily for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” Dear brothers and sisters in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ: what a Gospel text for the first sermon from a new pastor. New to you and new to the ministry. I reckon the phrase “trial by fire” might apply here. Now I’ve had a few weeks to look over the reading, thankfully. But I have to admit, at first I was kinda petrified. This here is one of those “hard sayings” of our Lord people always fret about. One of the hardest in the New Testament. A difficult teaching. It’s not really one you’d eagerly volunteer to begin a ministry with. But alas, this is what the lectionary has given us. And you know, the more I thought about, the more I realized that this is in fact the perfect reading for this Sunday, for my first Sunday in this pulpit, for our first Sunday together as congregation and pastor. It is altogether fitting, and I pray you’ll soon see why.

Now the reading continues, of course. Verse forty: “Whoever receives you receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” These words were spoken by our Lord to the twelve disciples as He sent them out to the lost sheep of Israel, giving them the authority to drive out unclean spirits and to heal the sick. He sent them out *with an authority* divinely instituted – and with a purpose bound to the will of the One Who sent Him, the will of the Father. And as you’ll recall though, further along in our narrative a bit, following Christ’s death and resurrection, our Lord visited His disciples once again when they were locked behind those closed doors for fear of the Jews. Remember? In that locked room when our Lord miraculously appeared to them after His resurrection, He breathed upon His disciples, as St. John tells us, and said “Peace be with you.” It’s how He greeted them.

Our Lord did in fact come to bring peace – He *did* bring peace – He *does* bring peace to the earth. Then and there in that room with His disciples our Lord instituted the office of the Holy Ministry, handing over the keys, as it were, giving His disciples the authority now to forgive sins. He brought them literal peace and then sent them out with that very peace, with the Holy Spirit breathed upon them, to all nations, to forgive sins. You see, that peace which surpasses all understanding we so often hear about, that peace is inseparably linked to the forgiveness of sins, that forgiveness which was won at Calvary by our Lord’s painful passion and death for the sake of an undeserving world. But in that locked room, when our Lord gave His disciples the authority to proclaim His peace by forgiving sin, the wages of which is death, Paul says, for which all sinners are fated, He also gave them the authority to retain it – to withhold forgiveness from all who refuse to repent, who decline to believe. It is the same office of forgiveness though. It is the same Gospel of redemption and reconciliation in both cases. It is the same message and greeting of peace. But to the fallen world, to a world steeped in idolatry, to those ruled by the unholy trinity of the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh, to any and all who cling to what separates them from God, this peace does not seem like peace at all, but rather a terrible sword.

Dear friends, when we hear this hard saying of our Lord, we must not forget its context though. Our Lord was sending His disciples out into a world set deliberately against them. He was warning them that the world would reject their message just as the world would reject Him – as the world did reject Him. To the world, Christ’s message is a sword, an instrument of undermining, upending, and destruction. It is the law which convicts and accuses, which puts to death, as St. Paul tells us in our lesson from Romans. It is that which divides people, even families. And brothers and sisters, things haven’t changed much in the intervening few millennia. This message still divides today, centuries later. It is radical, counter-cultural, always has been, it is the kind of thing that sooner or later will get you into trouble with the world. And most unfortunately, chances are it is the kind of message that has already caused division in your own families. What is a present peace to the faithful is a severing sword to the unfaithful. The Word of God is absolute truth, it is enduring, it is imperative.

But as St. Paul also tells us in the Epistle to the Hebrews, this Word of God is moreover a double-edged sword, which cuts deep like a surgeon, down to the joints and marrow, he says, opening us up, exposing our sin, our iniquity, our worthlessness. It discerns the very thoughts and intentions of the heart, Paul explains. The Word does this. And for a sinner, like me and you, those thoughts and intentions are more often petty and pitiable and impious than good. So for a world which is fond of the petty and the impious, for a world that loves the self above all else, which worships money, fame, perversion, and power, for such a world this Word is an enemy, a threat, a double-edged sword and no peace at all.

And remember as well, to the Corinthian church, St. Paul further declared that “the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who perish.” But friends, for those who are saved, he maintains that it is “the power of God.” It is foolishness and yet the very strength of the God Who created and sustains all things. It is folly to the world and yet wisdom to the church. It is a violent double-edged sword and yet a peace which surpasses all understanding. It is both law and Gospel. Now this is a paradox, to be sure – a true mystery. But in such things the faith consists. Our faith is based in mystery, in apparent contradiction – in what surpasses understanding. In what appears ludicrous and even threatening to the world. Our faith itself intimidates the world out there. As it should. And when threatened and intimidated, the world, of course, pushes back. We know this all too well. The world persecutes those who share the Gospel. The world seeks to silence those who preach the cross. It is guaranteed, more so even than death and taxes: that the world pushes back against the charisma of the church. But as the sainted author Flannery O’Conner once advised so well: “you must push back against the age as hard as it pushes against you.” And that’s really the message of our Gospel today in a nutshell. Our Lord brings a sword only insofar as the world refuses His peace. When His peace divides families, it is only because loyalties are already divided. The first commandment is the greatest, beloved. You are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things, even yourself, even your loved ones, and most certainly this fallen world. Our fidelity is to the faith, which must always come first. If anything else in your life should precede it, should come first for you, that thing is, according to Dr. Luther, no more than idolatry.

Idolatry today may take the explicit form of pride parades, drag shows, and abortion clinics – and true enough, these are without question cavalcades and temples of idol-worship and narcissistic decadence. But there’s idolatry in our own lives as well. In our own hearts. Idolatry is whatever we place before God in our daily lives. And our Lord’s message this morning is straightforward: “When these things come before Me, you are not worthy of Me.” Considering that, I urge you—I have to!: push back against the world, friends. Push back against what gets between you and God, against whatever makes you unworthy. Push back against whatever is of sin and contrary to the Word of God. Push back.

But know this, too. Know that you will ultimately fail in this. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep pushing against the age and the world as hard as it pushes against you. But just know, you will fail. You will stumble. You will give in on occasion and act contrary to God’s Word. You will unjustly anger your loved ones. You will resent your co-workers. You will envy your friends. You will lose your temper. You will be greedy with your time. You will miss an opportunity to stand up for your faith. You will likely skip a Sunday service. You will be embittered behind the wheel. You will lust after a woman. You will take your husband for granted. You will neglect your parents. You will let your children down. You will hurt others. And worst of all, you will put yourself and your many concerns before your God. In time, these things will happen. Because you are still a sinner. You are both sinner and saint – redeemed and yet amid a battle under way against your corrupted nature. That is the baptismal life this side of heaven. And you see, that right there is the other side of the message this morning. This text is a text about persecution and priorities, about faith confronting a broken world, it is about sad realities and carrying crosses. But it is just as much about the office. The office of the ministry, of those sent by the Lord for the sake of reconciliation. Jesus sent out His disciples and He still does so, He instituted this office for good, He placed me in it three weeks ago, so that when you fail and fall, when you stumble and sin, that you might nevertheless be forgiven – because He still loves you dearly, as much as ever. It’s so that His grace might be delivered to you when you need it the most. When we put anything else before God it makes us unworthy of Christ. But dear faithful, we were born unworthy of Him, conceived in original sin. We have never been worthy by ourselves. Not a day of our lives.

It is only on account of His bitter sufferings and sacrificial death that we are made worthy, that we are washed clean by His blood. We are only worthy because He makes us worthy. And that’s an ongoing reality, friends. It is continual. You were made worthy in your Holy Baptism, when you died to sin and were raised to life in Christ. You are made worthy every single time you confess your sins and receive absolution, spoken from the lips of a minister of the Lord and as confident as from the Lord Himself, as Luther says. And most wondrous of all perhaps, you will be made worthy when you feast on your Lord’s very Body and Blood in the most blessed Sacrament of this Altar.

Jesus reminds us in our text that we are called to take up our crosses and follow Him – that we are to be willing even to die for Him, to lose our lives for His sake. This altar rail here. Do you see it? Brothers and sisters, never forget: in this communion, together, we are family. To gather around this altar together is to be a family. That is what it means. It means to love one another. Gathering here is not a mere routine, a nice symbol and gesture. No, to commune from this altar rail is no different at all than professing to the world proudly that we here are willing to die for one another. That we are willing to die for our Lord. That we are willing to take whatever abuse and oppression the world throws at us for our Lord’s sake, and for the sake of one another. That’s precisely how the early church interpreted Holy Communion – how those understood it who were faced with the very real threat of pain and death at every turn. At this rail, we are united with Christ and one another. We are His body. The world rejected Him and it will most assuredly reject us too. But that is no cause for concern, because we have our Lord’s Body and Blood for our strength. And we have one another, for encouragement, for building up, for brotherhood, for sisterhood, for fellowship. Our Lord makes us worthy at this altar. He does so individually and He does so communally. He binds us together. We are forgiven together, we’re strengthened together, we are called to carry our crosses together. And friends, we are called to push back against the world together. It’s the only way we can.

Jesus Christ, through the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, has placed me in this office. To be with you, at your side, as one body, the church, together.

I beg you not to think of our relationship so much as pastor and congregation, because there is only one undivided church, and we are equally a part of it. You and I are the church, together. It’s that simple. Having said that, our Lord has so chosen to place me in this office to hand over His grace, to preach His Word and administer His sacraments to you. And that’s what I plan to do, in season and out of season. When it is welcome and when it is unwelcome. I will preach the Word, the message of the cross, what is foolishness to that world which is perishing. And sometimes you may not like what you hear. Frankly, sometimes I don’t. But dear faithful, that’s that double-edged sword, that’s the law, still laying bare sin and the death it alone can promise. But I will be right here. With you and for you. I will baptize children, I will marry friends, I will bury loved ones. That’s what I’ve been called to do. To walk alongside you in this Christian life, to equip you to be a faithful witness to the world, and to prepare you each for a blessed Christian death. And I aim to do just that, the Lord helping me every minute of every day. But know this, too. I will fail at times. I will undoubtedly make mistakes. I may even sin against you. Because I’m no less a sinner, and I’m perhaps even the chief of sinners, as St. Paul, too, once confessed. But if and when I do, I’ll ask for your forgiveness and pray that you will offer it. And God helping me always, I will be here day in and day out, sharing His forgiveness with you. Because we are a family beyond division. We are a family brought together by the Holy Spirit and bound together by the love of Christ and the peace He alone brings, that peace which surpasses all understanding. Our Lord indeed brings peace to the earth, dear faithful. He is, after, all, the Prince of Peace. And this is most certainly true. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.