

6 March 2005  
Lent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“New Kingdom, New Life”

Text: Mathew 20:17-28 (Hosea 5:15-6:2; Romans 8:1-10)

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

Back before I went to the seminary to become a pastor, I took a one day seminar on negotiating. That seminar taught what negotiating is all about, and how to do it. And to be honest, I didn't like it very much, and I don't remember much of what was taught that day. But one thing I do remember; one principle they taught, which I have used from time to time in my life: *you don't get what you don't ask for.*

James and John, in the Holy Gospel that we heard today, want to make sure they don't make that mistake! They may not get what they're asking for, but at least they're going to ask. (They even try to tip the scales in their favor by getting their mother to ask for them!) They want the seats of honor. They want the seats of power, at Jesus' right and left, in His kingdom. . . . And by worldly negotiating standards, what they did made perfect sense. They would have been praised in the seminar that I took! They took the initiative! They were bold and out in front! For what if somebody else had asked and gotten it instead of them? Then they would have been kicking themselves! So they ask. For time was running out, you know. Jesus had just told them so. They are on their way up to Jerusalem, where Jesus is going to be delivered over to His enemies and killed. And since he who hesitates is lost, they ask. Maybe the timing was a little crass, coming right after Jesus talks about His death, but hey – *you don't get what you don't ask for!*

But James and John either didn't know, or hadn't learned, something very important about God – **He doesn't negotiate!** Things are the way they are with God. He does not change. He will not lower His standards or expectations. He will not listen to our arguments, or rationales, or explanations, or negotiations. He does not operate the way the world operates. The way the Gentiles, the world, rule and lord and exercise authority, Jesus says – that's not how it is in this kingdom! In *My* kingdom. With you. . . . No, God doesn't negotiate. There's no give and take. No give a little here, give a little there. No. **He gives to whom He will give, we receive, and that's it.** And so as for those seats at Jesus' right and left? Sorry, James and John. They're not available. They've already been given. They are, Jesus says, *“for those for whom it has been prepared by my*

***Father.”***

But how kindly Jesus deals with James and John! That’s one of the things that stands out for me in this reading, perhaps because it is so unlike me and my temper! Jesus doesn’t tell them they shouldn’t have asked! He doesn’t call them knuckleheads, or throw up His hands in exasperation and say “*Haven’t you been listening!*” No, He simply (and probably calmly) says, “***You do not know what you are asking.***” Ever patient, ever gentle, ever kind, Jesus tries once again to help His disciples understand what His kingdom is all about. That it’s not about greatness. It’s not about ruling and lordship. It’s not about who’s up here and who’s down here. It’s not about getting your fair share, or what’s coming to you. It’s not about being all that you can be. It’s not about climbing the Christian ladder. No, the kingdom of God, as Jesus had just told His disciples, is about death and resurrection. Anything other than that is just trying to negotiate with God!

And of that we are all guilty. For there is a little bit (or a lot!) of James and John within each of us. That thinks we’re a little better than the competition. That little bit of us that craves recognition. That seeks praise and honor. That wants to stand out above the crowd. That hopes to be the *first one* asked. That wants to be admired. That wants to be thought of as the pastor of all pastors, or the Christian of all Christians, or the servant of all servants. And to be thought of that way not only among men, but also by God. And to think that we will be one of those God will at least consider to be in the running for one of those seats of honor at Jesus’ right and left!

But with us too, our Saviour does not throw up His hands in exasperation, or lose His patience with us. No, but if you will allow me to paraphrase: “***the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to lay down His life as a ransom for [knuckleheads].***”

That’s what the kingdom of God is all about: Jesus’ death and resurrection for knuckleheads like James and John and you and me. Jesus’ death and resurrection, so that we who are dead in our trespasses and sins, dead in our pride and glory-seeking, dead in thinking that we can negotiate with God – so that we can live. . . . For remember what I said earlier – **God does not negotiate. He gives, we receive, and that’s it.** *And that’s not a bad thing, but a good thing!* For if we had to negotiate our way out of our sins, out of our shortcomings, and somehow try to get what we need from God, we would have no hope. There is no way. We have nothing to offer God. He doesn’t need us. And so it is when we stop trying to negotiate with God, when we stop trying to justify ourselves and our sinful thoughts, words, deeds, and desires, and instead simply humble ourselves in repentance and cry out “*Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!*” . . . that is what the kingdom

of God is all about. And then we, who are dead in our sins, are raised to a new life in forgiveness.

For God gives, we receive, and that's it. **God gives** His Son for the life of the world, and we by faith receive that life. **God gives** His Son into death on the cross for our sins, and we by faith receive the forgiveness earned by Him there. **God raises** His Son from death and the grave, the victor over the devil, and we by faith receive that victory and life. **God gives** us His Word to teach us of His salvation. **He gives** us His sacraments of baptism and Supper that we might live in Him and He in us. **He gives** us life and family and work and play and friends and talents and abilities – all that we have and all that we are is from Him. It is all a gift, that we can only receive. God does not negotiate. He gives, we receive, and that's it!

And again, that's a good thing. For a short time after the Holy Gospel that we heard, when James and John saw Jesus coming into His kingdom, and saw who was hanging on His right and left – I'll bet then they were glad they didn't get what they asked for! They *really* didn't know what they were asking, did they? . . . But look what they received! They received much more. They received what they didn't deserve, and didn't even think to ask for: the life of the eternal Son of God, in exchange for their life. His death *in place* of their death. His kingdom *instead* of a worldly kingdom. They were served by the life and death of God Himself! And what greater honor could there be than that? That God would die for you? For your sins. To save you and me, who quite frankly, aren't worth it. . . . And yet He did. That is how things are in the kingdom of God. And how good is that! And so, as we heard from Paul in Romans, ***“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”***

And believe that! Believe that in every part of your lives! No matter what happens. And I say that – and stress it! – because it's sometimes hard to believe. Like with what we heard happened with James and John. When Jesus asked them: ***“Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?”*** And they responded yes, and so Jesus tells them, ***“You will drink the cup,”*** I think our first inclination is to think that that is some kind of penalty, their punishment, for making such a bold and misguided request. . . . But no! There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! No, this was not penalty or punishment, just as when things go wrong in our lives it is not penalty or punishment. No, the cup that Jesus drank, we drink, not as punishment, but because we are in Him. *Only Jesus has radically transformed that cup for us!* For the cup of suffering, condemnation, and death that He drank on the cross, has become for us the cup of His blood, life, and forgiveness given us in His Supper. And that is the cup He now gives us to drink of. A cup of blessing. A cup of salvation. The cup of His kingdom of death and resurrection, that His death and resurrection become our death and resurrection. He

gives, we receive, *and that's good!*

And James and John learned that. They received and lived in the kingdom of God. Not lording, but serving, and laying down their lives for others. James through beheading, John through exile. And these not as punishment, but as privilege. They served not because those they served deserved it, but because of who they were. And they lived not to earn eternal life, but because they had been given eternal life. And any kingdom of this world meant little in comparison to that! . . . And so too now you and me. You have received the kingdom of God. You have been baptized into Christ. His death and resurrection is your death and resurrection. You receive His cup of blessing and salvation. You have the gift of eternal life. *God gave, you received, and how good that is!* . . . And so now, we have the privilege of serving, and laying down our lives for others. Not as punishment, not because others deserve it, and not to earn eternal life. But *because* we have received a kingdom. The kingdom of God. And we know that the kingdoms of this world are nothing compared to that! And so we do not lord, but forgive. We do not demand, but serve. We do not see how high we can climb, but how low we can go. For when you lay down your life for others, you are truly at Jesus' right and left. And do not be afraid to do so! To give up your wants and desires for your family, your friends, even your enemies. And you will have plenty of opportunities to do so, right where you are, where God has placed you. You will not have to go looking for those opportunities. They will come to you. As a father, a worker, a son or daughter, a pastor, a friend, or whoever you are. And when you lay down your life, when you forgive, when you serve – you show yourself to be sons and daughters of the King who did that for you.

And that is how it is in the kingdom of God. No negotiating, just gifts. For, in fact, you *have* received what you didn't ask for, and what we wouldn't have dreamed of asking for – the kingdom. His kingdom. He's given it all to you. . . . Living in that kingdom now looks strange to the world. That's not how they live. But it's how we live. For God gave, we have received, and we're free. Free to live. Free to give. To forgive, and love, and serve. For that's how it is in the kingdom of God!

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.