

7 September 2008
Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Picking Weedy Flowers”

Text: Matthew 18:1-20; Romans 13:1-10

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

Qualified or unqualified? That is the question raging in the presidential debate right now. Is he qualified enough to be the president? Does she have enough experience? Who should be permitted and elected to hold the greatest and highest office in the United States and arguably, the world? It is an important question. As we heard from St. Paul in Romans, the governing authorities are ministers of God for your good, to be God's avenger against those who do wrong, and to praise and approve of those who do good. And so who sits in that office is important. God can - and will - use whomever is elected and work through them, whether male or female, old or young, experienced or inexperienced, believer or unbeliever. But that does not mean we should make a poor choice. Qualifications are important.

But for us today the question is not about the presidency. But rather, what about qualifications for the kingdom of heaven?

That is the question that was on the minds of the disciples that day when they went up to Jesus and asked: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” It would be interesting to know why they asked. Perhaps they had been arguing over the greatness of the patriarchs and prophets in the Old Testament - some stumping for Abraham, some for Moses, and maybe some for Elijah (for he was taken bodily right to heaven, after all!). Or maybe they were trying to figure out where John the Baptist fit into the pecking order. Or David, or Solomon, or Jacob, or Joseph. In this race, who would be elected? Who would have the qualifications to be the greatest? To sit in that greatest and highest seat next to the throne of God?

Perhaps they also wanted to know because they were often arguing about which of

them was the greatest. We heard and considered that here, just a couple of weeks ago. Like me, they need to hear some teachings several times before it finally sinks into our thick skulls. So it comes up again today.

Well, as usual, Jesus surprises them with His answer. "And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'" This is a completely different worldview than what we live with everyday. For us, for the world, childhood is a stage to pass through, and often to pass through as quickly as you can. Sometimes I think that if science could come up with a way for women to give birth to adults, they would. Childhood is seen as an inconvenience. Money spent on children and what they need could be spent on other things I want. Training and raising children is a bother. Motherhood and fatherhood are given second rate status to what are considered more important careers. And so children are told to grow up, act your age, and be more mature. And, some people would argue, our children are being told this earlier and earlier every generation.

But notice how Jesus speaks of children. They are not a bother, but a model for us. Childhood is not a stage to pass through, but a place to remain. For there is something about being a child that uniquely qualifies one for the kingdom of heaven - and that thing is dependence. A child left to survive on its own in this world will not last long; and a Christian who tries to survive in this world on their own will also not last long. Forget about greatness! If we even want to enter the kingdom of heaven at all, Jesus says we must become - and remain - like children. Completely and utterly dependent upon God for everything: upon the Father for all that we need in this world and life, upon the Son for the forgiveness of our sins and resurrection to a new life, and upon the Holy Spirit to give us faith.

And so we must think differently, as Christians. Differently than the world. According to the thinking of the world, to grow up means to become your own person, and to be independent, self-sufficient. But to grow up as a Christian means not to become your own person, but to become like Christ, to grow in our dependence upon Him, and repent of our notions of self-sufficiency.

To the thinking of the world, to act your age means to act like an adult, with adult

sensibilities, and adult thinking, and adult wisdom. But to act your age as a Christian means to act each day like a newborn child. For each day we are, if each day we remember our baptism, die and rise with Christ in repentance, and are born anew in the forgiveness of our sins. And so each day is a new day, a new life, as a child of God.

And to the thinking of the world, to be more mature is to leave the ways of childhood behind, to think more in shades of gray, to adjust your thinking to the wisdom of the world. But to be more mature as a Christian is to adjust your thinking to the wisdom of the Word of God, and to see ourselves more realistically. And so the more mature we are as Christians, not the more skillful and better we will be, but the more we will see our sin, our neediness, and our helplessness, and realize that it is far better not to walk with Jesus as a fellow adult, but to rest in His arms as a dearly loved child. And to know, that is what it means to be great in the eyes of God - to be His child - and that you cannot get any greater than that.

So who is qualified for the kingdom of heaven? Well, it is exactly those who know they are unqualified, and therefore receive the kingdom of heaven as a gift. For Christianity is not our campaign toward God, stumping for ourselves, doing good works to try to earn His vote, trying to show we are qualified. No. To be a Christian is simply to be loved, and to receive the love of God by faith. To believe that the love of God is greater than your sin, and greater than anything you could do. And that the One who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the One who came down from heaven and stood in our midst as a little child. For by putting a child in the midst of them, Jesus was not only teaching us and giving us an example, but was showing us a picture of Himself. He is the greatest who became the least, so that we who are the least might become the greatest.

And how low, how "least", did Jesus go? All the way to little Bethlehem, yes - but lower. All the way to rejection and scorning and mocking, yes - but lower still. All the way down to the whipping and humiliation of the cross, yes - but even lower still. He came all the way down to you. To you who have given your eyes, your hands, and your feet to sin. To you He came down to raise you up. That His death and resurrection be not just for some sin or most sin, but for your sin, for all sin. There is no sinner too low, and no sin He did not take upon Himself, giving His eyes for your eyes, His hands for your hands, and His feet for your feet, that His death be the death of all sin, and His resurrection be the resurrection of all sinners. That you and me, who are most unqualified for the kingdom of heaven, be given a place there. A place at the children's table, because that's where

Jesus is, and that's what all the tables in heaven are. For that's who all the folks in heaven are - children, children of God.

So if you, like the disciples, want to be great, well, act like a child! Don't be childish - that's not good. Rather, be like the child who picks a bunch of flowers for her mother - not to earn her love, but because she is loved. And the thing about those flowers, they won't be perfectly arranged, like from the florist; they won't be from the most beautiful ones that are kept behind fences; in fact, they will probably be weeds! But there are no more beautiful flowers in the eyes of any mother, because they are given in freedom, and in love.

And so too it is with us, only our flowers are our good works, done not to earn our Saviour's love and forgiveness, but because we are loved and forgiven. And our good works probably won't be perfectly arranged, or be the most beautiful things in the world, and might, in fact, be pretty weedy! But there are no more precious works to our Father in heaven than when we love because we have been loved, when we serve because we have been served, when we give because we have received, when we forgive because we have been forgiven. And in all these ways, to grow more child-like, more Christ-like. And live in the joy and freedom of a dearly loved child. Not burdened and overwhelmed with adult worries and sensibilities, because we have a Father taking care of those things for us. That we may live as children, for that is what we are, and will always be.

So come now to the children's table, where Jesus is for you today, here with His body and blood, to forgive you and restore you. And if you would be great in the kingdom of heaven, I don't want to hear your campaign speech! No, go be who you are. Go live as His child. Go pick some weedy flowers.

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.