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Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Greatness of Children”

Text: Mark 9:30-37

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

On the way through Galilee and to Capernaum, Jesus is catechizing, or teaching, His disciples. And so He was teaching them about the cross. That **“the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”** And He is teaching them that not because that is *part* of what the Christian faith and life is all about, or even the most important part - that is the Christian faith and life. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christianity is nothing.

And so all Christian teaching finds its beginning and its ending in the cross of Christ. And if there is any teaching that doesn't, it isn't Christian, and it's not of God. For it is on the cross where the power of God, the greatness of God, the glory of God, and the love of God, are shown for you. For there is God for you. His power, greatness, glory, and love made perfect in weakness.

Now, that is not how we are used to seeing or thinking about power and greatness, and so we need to be taught. Even more than that - we need to have this truth *implanted* into our hearts. Mere knowledge is not enough, for faith and life are not just of the mind, but of the heart. We often know what we *should* do, but don't do it! We need a change of heart, that what we know in our minds might also be reflected in our lives.

And so Jesus is catechizing His disciples. And they show how much they need this teaching, for on the way, even as they are hearing one thing from Jesus, they are arguing about another amongst themselves: **Who is the greatest?** They all wanted to be. But the measure of greatness they were using was how the world measures greatness. They didn't understand true greatness. That is what Jesus was trying to teach them.

And so Jesus gives them a picture. He brings a child before them and says: *servicing this child - that is greatness*. Now this is certainly not the greatness of the world, where parenting is regarded as secondary to career, and teachers are among the lowest paid professionals. Serving children isn't going to get you much in return. It

is a labor of love, and therefore a picture of what Jesus has come to do for you.

For Jesus is the answer to the disciple's argument. The greatest one was standing right in the midst of them, serving them as a labor of love. He is the Son of God who made Himself the least of all and the servant of all. Coming and serving the least, the lowest, the outcast, the sinner, and those twelve who were arguing that day about who was the greatest. Coming in humility and compassion toward us helpless children, and giving His life that we might have life.

And so Jesus teaches them about the cross, for that is how He has come to serve you. The cross is not *part* of His service for you; it is His service for you. It is not just the unhappy ending of the story; it is the story. Of all His life. It is why He is born, it is why He lives. All His words and work and life lead to the cross. That in His death be our life.

And in His death is our life, for on the cross Jesus makes atonement for our life-stealing sins. On the cross He dies the death we deserve. On the cross He reconciles us to His Father. How do we know? Because ***after three days He [did] rise*** from the dead. His resurrection is the proof. For where there is no more sin there is no more death. And where there is no more sin, then that which separated us from God is gone. And we are reconciled. And if sin and death and our separation from God are taken care of, then our life has been restored.

The disciples didn't understand this, and they were afraid to ask. For they had their minds on greatness, not the cross. To them, the two were opposites. But to Jesus, the two are one. And so (I guess we could say), *what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.*

And so we too need to be catechized, that we might learn to see this greatness, this oneness. We need to be catechized by the cross. We need the cross implanted in our hearts. We need the cross to put to death our old way of thinking, our old way of living, our old ways . . . period. That we might live a new life. A new life as a child again. A child of God.

Now, maybe your childhood was not a happy one, and maybe your childhood was stolen from you too soon. But your heavenly Father wants to give this life back to you. To restore what was either taken from you, or that you left behind, or never had at all. To be a child that isn't worried about who is the greatest, but is just a kid. Who doesn't worry about the bills, or the budget, or the strange noises at night, because we have a Father who is greater than all those things and has promised to provide. A child who enjoys the wonders of creation, not for what we can get out of them, but simply because they are the wonders of creation. It would be great to have such care-free days, wouldn't it? To be . . . born again?

Well that is the life that your Heavenly Father wants for you; the life the Son of God came to provide for you; and the life that the Holy Spirit is here to give to you. Life as a child. A child of God. That through the cross of Christ the old you be put to death, and a new you be born again.

And so that's what happens here, where Jesus and His cross are right in the midst of you, here for you. That in the waters of **Holy Baptism** the old you be drowned and die, and a new you be raised and born again. That in **Holy Absolution** all the sins and doubts and fears that haunt you be chased away by His loving embrace and the tender words of His love: *I forgive you all your sins*. And that in **Holy Communion**, we come and eat and drink the fruits of the cross that give us life - Jesus' own body and blood. The food of the new creation. The food of those born again to a new life. The food which nourishes and strengthens us to live as children of God.

That is the greatness that has been given to you. That cannot be earned, only given. And that Jesus now invites you to live. To be who you are. To live as His child. Not worrying about tomorrow, not worrying about greatness, but living in His love and giving His love.

It's that easy, and it's that hard. Yes hard, because the wisdom and ways of the world have been so ingrained in us and on us. The striving for greatness, for recognition, for power, for glory. The striving of ourselves and others that robs us of joy and life. That's why we need to be catechized - all our lives. The catechism isn't just *for children, but to make us children!* That we learn of the cross and have it implanted into our hearts, that Christ may grow in us and we in Him. That we live always as children of God, in the safety of His house, and in the security of His forgiveness and love. And so be great. For there is nothing greater than to be a child - a child 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.