

11 October 2017  
Pentecost 18 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

Jesu Juva

“Exalted in Jesus”

Text: Ephesians 4:1-6; Luke 14:1-11

Life often feels like a competition. To have the most friends or followers on social media. To get the closest parking spaces. To outdo your classmates. To be the fastest or the strongest, the prettiest or the most successful. To have the biggest church, the most influence, the best selling book. *No one remembers who comes in second*, it is said. And that’s often true.

When it comes to the things of this world, you could argue whether or not such competition is good. Perhaps it drives us on to greater excellence. But maybe it is an unhealthy competition that wears us down and wears us out. There’s never time to rest. There’s always another battle to win, another challenge to overcome. And many base their worth or value on whether or not they win.

How different then, the words we heard from the Apostle Paul today in the reading from Ephesians. ***To walk in humility*** (or lowliness) ***and gentleness*** (or meekness). ***In patience*** (or long-suffering). ***Bearing with one another in love. Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*** For in Christ, there is not you against me or you over me or me over you. It is not a competition. We are united, together, one in Christ. ***One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.***

That is the way of it with God. The world thinks of one as an individual thing, and therefore there is competition. My one against your one. For God, however, one is a unity. In marriage, two are made one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Many grains make up one loaf. The church is one body made up of many members (Romans 12:4), but is one body. One is the creative work of God. And one is, therefore, what the devil wants to destroy.

And so the devil is always trying to separate and divide. He turns us against one another. He turned Adam against Eve, Eve against Adam, and both against God. He divided Cain from his brother Abel, and pitted Esau against his brother Jacob. And in the Gospel we heard tonight, the reading from St. Luke, we heard it there, too. Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who’s in? Who’s out? Who gets the highest places, and who gets the lowest? Competition, not love. Division, not unity.

The Pharisee liked their places of honor. They worked hard for them. Paul had been a Pharisee. In fact, he called himself a Pharisee’s Pharisee. No one did Pharisee better than him. If he had been at the wedding feast of which Jesus spoke, he would have had no

qualms about taking the highest place. He earned it. He deserved it. And everyone there would have agreed.

But now, where is Paul? He's at no wedding feast - he is, he says, *a prisoner for the Lord*. But his perspective on things had changed long before this. It had been a hard lesson to learn, but he finally realized that there is a much greater honor than the honor you earn - the honor of grace. The honor you don't deserve, but which is granted to you as a gift. The honor given to you by Jesus.

That is the honor you have received.

I have been at a couple of fancy dinners in Washington with some pretty high powered people - Senators and Representatives and government officials. Laurie and I were honored just to have been invited to those feasts. But usually, after being there a few minutes and seeing everyone there, we'd look at each other and say: We don't belong here! And we didn't. It was pure kindness and grace that invited us.

But now imagine if one of those important people came up to us and gave us their place. If one of those high powered people insisted that we take their seats and they took ours. That would be extraordinary.

And it's what Jesus did. For who is honored more than the Son of God? And yet He came down from heaven and took our place - and not just the lowest seat at the feast, but lower than that: He took our place on the cross. He took our place in condemnation. He took our place as unworthy, undeserving outcasts. So that we could have His place. So that we could have His honor. So that we could be called children of God (John 1:12).

It would be enough just to be invited to the wedding feast of heaven, wouldn't it? But that's not good enough for Jesus. He wants more for you than that. He wants you to have His place.

And though we do not deserve it, we do belong there. For that feast is not filled with the high powered, the influential, the important people - but with sinners. Really bad sinners. Sinners washed clean in the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All of us one in Adam's sin, and all of us one in Jesus' atonement. For Jesus came to be one with us, that we be one with Him, united to Him, Bridegroom and Bride, Saviour and Church. He came down to you who are dead in your trespasses and sins and said to you: *Friend, move up higher*. And He raised you from your sins and gave you His seat. All by grace. All gift. No greater honor could you ever earn.

And so with this story, Jesus isn't just teaching us good etiquette, or how to get ahead in this world. You don't have to win; Jesus won for you. He is teaching us of Himself and what He has done for us. *And what we can now do for others*. For when you are one -

*God's* kind of one - when someone is exalted, so are you. It's not a competition, it's a unity. And when you humble yourself for another you are and will be exalted. It may not feel like it at the time, but you have Jesus' promise. And as the empty tomb proves, nothing is more sure than that.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.