

23 September 2018  
Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Great in God’s Eyes”

Text: Mark 9:30-37 (James 3:13-4:10; Jeremiah 11:18-20)

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

The disciples were *arguing about who was the greatest*. They weren’t talking about how Jesus fed over 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. They weren’t discussing how Jesus expelled that unclean spirit they could not. They weren’t trying to figure out what Jesus meant when He told them that He was going to be *delivered* - handed over, betrayed - *into the hands of men and then killed*, but that *after three days He would rise*. Nope. None of that. When faced with news of Jesus’ death, their minds went to who among them would be the greatest. It became all about them.

But before you cast aspersions on the disciples, let’s know that we do this too.

A doctor comes to us with bad news about a loved one; they do not have much longer to live. After the initial shock and sadness, thoughts often turn to other things, like *the inheritance*. How much will I get? And how often is there fighting and arguing over how things will be divided. It can become all about me.

Or, a co-worker is fired. But instead of worrying about his family . . . will I get his office? I wonder if I can get her clients? It becomes all about me.

Or, one of your teammates gets injured - maybe I can get his spot! It’s all about me.

It can happen in the church, too. Pastors can fall into this trap. When the church grows or is doing well, it’s because of me! Or, if the church is struggling - it’s because of me. Or, another church, a bigger church, a fancier church, a more prestigious church, needs a new pastor. I wonder if I could get that? It’s all about me.

Or with the people in the church. The church should do what I like, what I want. I should get more recognition for what I do. It can be all about me.

How is it with you? How do you fall into this trap? Because we all do. It’s part of our sinful human nature. It’s just that some of us hide it better than others.

So Jesus asks them what they were talking about; but He already knew. He knew what

was in their hearts. He knows what's in our hearts. They don't answer. They all look down at the ground. They're like dogs with their tails between their legs. Their faces are bursting with shame.

Now, again, before we cast aspersions on the disciples, let's acknowledge their faith - they know Jesus' kingdom is real, that they were onto something special here. They just weren't thinking about it in the right way yet. For you can't think about the kingdom of God like you think about things in the world. If you do, you're going to get it wrong. And the disciples were getting it wrong. As we sometimes do.

So Jesus sits them down and has a real "come to Jesus" meeting with them. And notice - He doesn't tell them they're wrong. He doesn't tell them it's wrong to want to be great, to be first. But they're thinking about it the wrong way. Success with Jesus, success in the kingdom of God, is not climbing up, it's climbing down. If you want to be first, be the last. If you want to be great, be the least.

It's what Jesus did, after all. He came down from heaven and was born and laid in a manger. He avoided the crowds who wanted to praise Him and make Him an earthly kind of king. And He died not a hero's death, but the death of a criminal. Not in order to be great, **but because He was great**. Because this is how greatness looks, this is how greatness acts, this is how greatness thinks in the kingdom of God.

So if this is not how you are looking and acting and thinking, repent. But repent of the right thing! Of this: not that what you're doing is wrong, **but that what you're believing is wrong**. That you think you have to make yourself great, *when you already are*. Because everything Jesus did He did not as an example to you, to show you how to do it. *He did it for you*. To make you great. And if the Son of God comes down from heaven to live for you and die for you, to forgive you and raise you, to make you a child of God and promise you a life and a kingdom that will never end (and He did!) . . . you gonna do better than that? You gonna get greater than that? Really? But it's how we think, isn't it? Because we don't believe. Because we're not thinking right about greatness. Because we're going after the wrong kind of greatness.

And greatness in this world is not all it's cracked up to be anyway. What's great today is discarded tomorrow. Think of the first video games and compare them to today's! And who is great today is forgotten tomorrow. When I speak to the youth in confirmation about Bill Clinton, a president of the United States not that long ago, they don't know who I'm talking about. Or, people who were considered great in the past aren't just forgotten, but are even considered criminals today - just think of all the Confederate generals whose names are being taken off buildings and whose statues are being covered, defaced, or destroyed.

But child of God is a great that doesn't go away. A great that not even death can take

away from you. Your trophies will fall apart, your accomplishment will be forgotten, your wealth will go to someone else. But child of God you will always be.

And so Jesus takes a child and puts him in the midst of the disciples. And He says (and I'm paraphrasing here): You wanna be great? Start here. And end here. This is where you'll find me. Down, not up. Last, not first. Least, not great in the eyes of the world.

And I absolutely love the picture on the cover of the bulletin today! I don't know how old the child Jesus put in the midst of them was - we're not told - but this one, the one in this picture, I think is perfect. Not even up to their waists, probably a bit wobbly on her feet, holding a stick she found on the ground. She wasn't worried about greatness - she had a stick! That fancy new toy is okay - but the box it came in is great! Children see that penny on the ground, that rock, that bug. Things we think aren't important or great, and so maybe we think the children that see them aren't so important or great.

But according to Jesus, there is nothing greater that we could do and be. You wanna be great? Receive this child in my name. And we do when we baptize our children in His name. And we do when we baptize adults in His name because - did you ever notice - we use the exact same liturgy. We baptize adults as if they were children. Because it doesn't matter how old you are, it's the same baptism, the same gift, the same name. And it's great. Giving all Jesus' greatness to that child or adult-child.

So you want to be great? Remember your baptism. That there in those waters Jesus received you and made you great because He made you a child of God and you can't get any greater than that. And repent that you keep trying (in a worldly way), and that you keep forgetting who you are.

And then this too: repent that you keep forgetting who others are as well. Are they great or lowly? Are they rich or poor? Are they homeless? It depends on how you see and think. Things may not be as they seem to us. Children see things differently, and children of God do too. That greatness isn't measured by honor and prestige, that richness isn't counted in dollars, and that the mansions of this world are hovels in the kingdom of heaven. So maybe we should fight and quarrel and strive and desire a bit less, and receive in Jesus' name a bit more.

So maybe we could sum all this up with words that we sang in the Introit this morning: ***Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*** Some people would say that verse isn't true, for I didn't get that new car, or that job, or that greatness I wanted, I desired. But maybe, rather, that proves these words, because you aren't delighting in the Lord, but in those other things - in the wrong kind of great things or greatness. The problem isn't with the Lord, it's with us and our desires, and what we delight in and think great. Like the disciples, we need to learn to think differently.

And when you do, when you delight yourself in the Lord, in being His child, you'll start to see things differently. All kinds of things.

Because you are great in Jesus' eyes, maybe you'll see that the great of this world isn't all it's cracked up to be . . .

Because your sins are forgiven - all of them, great and small! - maybe you can forgive those who sin against you . . .

Because Jesus gave His life for you, maybe you can give your life for others . . .

The world will think you quite strange, for not acting like them, thinking like them, believing like them. They might even turn against you, as they turned against Jeremiah and Jesus and the disciples. So be it. You're a child of God! You wanna trade that for the approval of a fleeting and fickle world?

So maybe instead we'll come and receive the Body and Blood of the child God sent to us and put in our midst . . . who looked down at the sticks and rocks and bugs, the helpless and homeless and needy . . . and who, though great, became nothing, that we who were nothing might be great. **And you are.** For this child, Jesus, came for you and named you with His name, has forgiven you with His forgiveness, and feeds you with His Body and Blood. And when He comes *again*, He will give you even more - His kingdom.

So remember who you are. And be who you are. You just can't get any greater than that.

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.