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Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“First or Last?”

Text: Mark 9:30-37

(Thanks to the Rev. Wally Arp for some of the thoughts and ideas contained in this sermon.)

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

Last week in the Holy Gospel, we heard that Jesus began to teach His disciples about His passion – that He was going to be rejected, arrested, and crucified, but that after three days He would rise again. The disciples didn’t understand why Jesus was saying such things, and Peter rebuked Him for it. To which Jesus responded to Peter and his comment, **“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”**

Well today, we heard in the next chapter of Mark’s Gospel that Jesus is still teaching His disciples about this – that He is going to be killed, and then after three days rise again. But this time, the disciples don’t say anything! **“They did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask Him.”** They were afraid, perhaps, of being called dull and slow of faith, as Jesus had said to them before. They were afraid, perhaps, of being called ‘Satan’ by Jesus again. They were afraid, and so this time, they just kept their mouths shut.

At least in front of Jesus! But it was a different story once they began talking amongst themselves. For even though they did not understand what Jesus was talking about, it seems they began making plans! For if Jesus was leaving them, who would then be in charge? **Who was the greatest?** Who would take over? Who would rise above the rest? . . . I was reading the sermon of a brother pastor on this text, and this is how he imagined the conversation might have gone:

“Peter, of course, would have begun. "Hey, hey, hey, guys, I am the big fisherman. I am the guy who walks on water. I am the guy that Jesus has nicknamed Rocky. I am the greatest.”

Matthew might well have been upset by Peter's boast, and countered, "Well, you may be the guy who walks on water, but you're also the guy who sinks. How about me? You know, I left a very lucrative government job to follow Jesus. I think I'm the greatest.”

And Thomas would have said, "I doubt it."

John would have quietly confessed, "But I'm the disciple that Jesus loves."

His words would have been lost by the claim of Andrew, "But I was picked to be a disciple first. First is first, guys"

Judas could have hopped in, and said, "Yes, but Jesus trusts me with the money."

Nathanael would have said, "Jesus selected me before He ever saw me and I think that makes me very special."

Simon would have laid his special qualifications as a political activist before the group, and Philip would have said, "But with my Greek background, I do have some very special connections." (Rev. Kenneth Klaus, Lutheran Hour, 10/12/2003)

Now, at this point, it is easy to criticize the disciples. Jesus was right – how dull they are! How slow to learn! . . . But here we convict ourselves with our own thoughts and words, for **we do this too**. Like the disciples, maybe not before Jesus, but certainly amongst ourselves. For we too argue and debate as to who is the greatest – both within the church and outside of the church. For example:

+ In our synod, one side says they are the greatest because they are focused on mission and outreach, while the other side says they are the greatest because they are focused on doctrine, without which we have nothing to reach out with. *Who is the greatest?*

+ In some congregations, pastor and people argue against one another as to who is supreme. *Who is the greatest?*

+ Some churches battle against one another, one insisting that they are greater because they are growing, with the other insisting they are greater because they are more orthodox. *Who is the greatest?*

+ Pastors too, often argue with other pastors about who is greater – is it the one who leads the bigger church, or the one invited into the special program, or the one elected to district or synodical office, or the one with the most education? *Who is the greatest?*

+ And outside the church, this battle shows itself in power struggles of all sorts, between husbands and wives, between friends, between neighbors, between co-workers. The battle for pecking order, for power, for influence, for getting our way. Who will lead? Who will be the greatest? Who will be first, and who will be last? Perhaps there is no

greater indication of the sinful nature that lives in each of us than when we enter into, or continue, these frays. It is as we heard in the Epistle reading from James: our pride, our anger, our jealousy, our vanity, our lust, revealing itself and causing us to vilify and contest against those with whom we should be united. Disciple against Disciple. Christian against Christian. Church against Church. *Who is the greatest?*

And so in response, to settle the argument, Jesus brings a child into their midst . . . and He sets this child before our eyes and ears today. And lest we be dull and slow to learn, this, Jesus is teaching, is greatness in the Kingdom of God. . . . *And picture this!* A child, perhaps five years old; shirt half tucked in and half hanging out; maybe a scab on one knee after playing a bit too hard; hair all tousled. And Jesus takes *this child* in His arms – not Peter or James or John or any of the other disciples; not a Pastor or an Elder – this child, and says, ***“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”***

And with this, Jesus not only explodes the disciples’ ideas and striving for greatness, but He also gives us **a picture of Himself**. The Son of God who, though the greatest, became the least. Who came down from Heaven and became a child. The Creator become a creature. The One subject to no laws, who put Himself under the Law. The One who is Life and the giver of life, giving His life to be executed on a cross. . . . A pathetic tragedy, the world says. A great life wasted and cut short, the world says. . . . But no – for as Jesus was trying to teach His disciples, it is exactly in this humility, in this lowering, in this self-sacrifice, that we see the true greatness and glory of God. Greatness not as the world measures greatness, but greatness in the eyes of God. For greatness in the eyes of God is not to ascend to the heights, but to descend to the depths. It is not to be served, but to serve. It is not to save or elevate yourself, but to lay down your life for others.

And such opportunities for greatness are all around you in abundance! To visit the sick and shut in. To feed the hungry. To speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. To encourage the depressed. To comfort the mourning. To lower ourselves and raise up others. . . . *Yet these are the very things we fail to do, are they not?* Looking instead to do the things of greatness. The really hard things, the really big things, the things that will get us the most attention.

But do you see irony in all of that? The higher we try to climb, the farther down we fall.

And when we fall, we can do one of two things. We can start back up the ladder to worldly greatness. Trying to climb better, and faster, and stronger, or maybe trying different ways. **Or** we can give up, and repent. Repent of our pride. Repent of our self-

determination. Repent of our thirst for greatness and power. And admit that greatness in the eyes of God is not something we can ever earn or achieve – it can only be *bestowed*. Bestowed upon us sinful children by a merciful Father. A gift bestowed without any merit or worthiness on our part. A gift completely undeserved. A gift so costly that it cost the Son of God His life, and yet the Son of God, our Saviour Jesus Christ, considered that not too high a price to pay!

And that gift bestowed, what does that gift do? **It makes you great by making you children.** Children of God, by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of the Son of God for you. Children of God who cling to their Father. Children washed by their Father, and fed by their Father, and who hear the words of their Father. Children who want only to be near their Father, in faith and forgiveness, in love and life. Children secure and confident in their place in the family. That is the great gift that has been given to you. And there is no greater gift, no greater position, than to be a child of your Heavenly Father.

And then, O disciples, having received all that your Father has to give – His forgiveness, His life, and His salvation – we can then begin to do for others. Because no longer do we have to worry about ourselves and our greatness – that has been taken care of for us! No now, now we can concern ourselves with others. With those around us. Visiting, feeding, comforting, forgiving, welcoming and serving the least. Giving ourselves, as Christ gave Himself for us. Not earning, but *showing* the greatness that has been given to us. The greatness of children of God. The greatness of freedom. The greatness of sins forgiven. The greatness that enables us to make ourselves last, because we know that our Father has already made us first!

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.