

13 November 2005
Second Last Sunday in the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Sweating the Small Stuff”

Text: Matthew 25:31-46; 1 Thessalonians 1:3-10

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

There was a book that came out a few years ago titled: *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff: Simple ways to keep the little things from taking over your life*. It became a best seller for a while. Evidently, many people wanted to prevent the little things from taking over their life.

But today, we heard the very opposite of that! In the Holy Gospel, as Jesus describes for us what Judgment Day is going to be like, He doesn't point to what we would consider the *big stuff* – the really important stuff, the really hard stuff. **He points to the small stuff.** Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the lonely. These are the things that He remembers, that He treasures, that He points to as the evidence of faith. And so if we were going to write a book based upon these verses that we heard today, I suppose its title would be: *Sweating the Small Stuff! Simple ways to keep the little things taking over your life!*

The problem is, though, that we don't like doing the little things. Because they're little! They're ordinary. They won't get us the *recognition* (so we think!) that doing the big thing will. And so instead of helping out at the local soup kitchen, *we* want to end world hunger! Instead of helping out at the local Crisis Pregnancy Center, *we* want to march on the Supreme Court to wipe out *all* abortion! Instead of telling our neighbor about Jesus, *we* worry about the lonely guy on the desert island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean – whose going to tell him! What issue is it for you? Don't we think that way?

Now it's *not wrong* to think (and hope for, and work for) those big things, and to pray about them. They're important issues. But there *are* a couple of problems with that kind of thinking. **For first**, when we focus on the big stuff, we tend not to do the small stuff . . . well, because it's small! It doesn't seem to matter. **And when we don't do the small stuff, and most of us aren't in much of a position to do the big stuff, we wind up doing *no* stuff!** Oh, piously! To be sure. We've *thought* a lot about it, but we never quite got around to *doing* anything . . .

You see, I think that was the problem with the goats. The goats that Jesus talks about in the

Holy Gospel weren't your everyday, run-of-the-mill unbelievers – they were apparently goats who *thought* they were sheep! They were surprised at the judgment of Christ! They know who He is; they call Him **“Lord.”** *Lord! When? When did we not do these things for you? Oh, for if we had known that it was you, then we certainly would have done them!* Because then it would have been a big thing. If *Jesus* were hungry, of course we would give Him food! If *Jesus* were naked, of course we would give Him clothes! Or as Luther liked to say, if we had been in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, of course *we* would have opened our home to Him!

Big stuff. We like the big stuff. *Don't sweat the small stuff!* There are plenty of people to do that! . . . But is there? Or is focusing on the big stuff really just an excuse for us to do nothing? A seduction of Satan to make us feel good about ourselves, to make us lazy, to make our love for others grow cold.

And that leads to the **second** problem about focusing on the big stuff, and that is that it betrays a lack of faith in our Saviour. Now that sounds pretty harsh, **but what enables us to sweat the small stuff is faith and trust in our Saviour who has already taken care of the big stuff!** To trust that He knows what He's doing. That He who created the world, and is taking care of the world, and died on the cross for the life of the world, is not now abandoning the world! We don't have to do Jesus' job for Him! Faith lets Jesus take care of the big stuff, and does what has been given us to do – *the small stuff*. And that is enough. *More than enough*. Ten Commandments stuff.

Not that it's the doing of these things, or the number of these things that we do, that saves us – no, it is the doing of these things *that reveals our faith*. For at the Judgment (as Jesus described it), the sheep and the goats are separated *first – before* any deeds are mentioned or pointed to at all! Jesus does not first look at what we have done and then separate the sheep from the goats. He does not say, “OK, you've done good so you go over there; but you – no, not so good, so you go over there.” Even though that's how most people picture it. No, before any judgment takes place, a division is made. Before any judgment is made, the Good Shepherd already knows those who belong to Him (the sheep) and those who do not (the goats). And that is a determination made on the basis of faith alone.

And so here we see what faith really is. And it is first of all *passive*, doing nothing. It is itself a gift to us from our Saviour, which *only receives* all that Jesus has done for us. **Jesus is the one active here, for you.** He is the One who took your sins and failures and died for them in your place on the cross. He is the One who not only laid down His life for you, but then took it up again in the resurrection, and now gives you the forgiveness, life, and salvation He earned for you there. He is the One who has made you one of His sheep, washing you clean and bringing you into His sheep pen, the Church, in Holy Baptism; feeding you with His Supper; and speaking to you in His Word, so that you know His voice.

You are one of His own, and He *knows* it, for He *did* it. For all this you did nothing. You can only receive this. *Passive* faith.

But faith also has another side to it. Faith is not just *passive*, it is also *active*. And it is this active faith, *enlivened* by passive faith, that does good works. That does the small stuff. Because it can't help it. And here, Jesus is not only active *for you*, He is also active *in you*. And it shows. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "***For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you***" – how do they know? – "***because our gospel came to you not only in Word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. . . . Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.***" Or in other words, passive faith cannot remain only passive faith. It goes forth everywhere. It becomes *active* faith. And yet this is not two faiths, but one faith – two sides of the same coin. Passive faith toward God which *receives* all from Him, then is enacted in active faith in love toward our neighbor, which *gives* all to him. It sweats the small stuff. The stuff that is given us to give.

And it is the small stuff that is most pleasing to our God. Not only the deed, but that in sweating the small stuff, we show our faith in the One who sweated the big stuff for us, so that we do not have to worry about it! *For what is the big stuff in your life? In the Church? In the world?* Is not your Saviour, who defeated sin, death, and the devil for you in His death and resurrection, able to handle these things? **He is. He did. And He does.** And therefore, with such confidence and faith, you can live. Really live. Joyously live! And go out and do those little things. Be the best parent, the best friend, the best worker, the best boss, the best citizen, the best child, the best spouse you can be. Take care of your neighbor, and help those in need. *Sweating the small stuff*, not because you have to, but because you can! And imagine if everyone in the world did that – the small stuff. Would there be any big stuff?

And then when the Judgment does come, you sheep also will be surprised. When Jesus points to all that you did, and you say: *When? When Lord, did we do all this?* For those who are the best Christians are those who consider themselves the worst sinners. Sinners deserving of nothing. Sinners who survive only in the grace and forgiveness of Christ, repenting of their sins, hearing His Word, receiving His body and blood. Knowing that He is everything, and that we are nothing. . . . But that is when our Saviour will reveal – for all to see – the true reality. That in His sight, even the smallest of works, done in faith, are of the greatest value. And all of them, He remembers. Your sins? They're not there! They were forgiven; erased long ago by His blood, shed for you. But all the small stuff? He keeps. He remembers. The evidence of faith. Saving faith.

Oh, now, I should tell you, if you want a copy of that book I've been talking about, there are a bunch available on *amazon.com* . . . and cheap too! Only one cent! Really! I looked it

up! I guess, in the end, that book's not really worth that much. So if you want some guidance for your life, I think I would recommend instead the words that we hear *here* – the words of absolution, the words of holy wisdom, the words of institution – for they are worth much more than one cent. They give you eternal life. Words that sound like this: ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”***

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.