

7 October 2007  
Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Worthy in Christ”

Text: Luke 17:1-10

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

*“We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”*

Did you hear those words a moment ago? Those are *tough* words. For none of us wants to be unworthy. In fact, in this world and life, we strive awfully hard to be worthy. To be worthy of our spouse’s love; to be worthy of our parent’s pride; to be worthy of our co-worker’s admiration; to be worthy of a friend’s trust; to be worthy of our children’s respect and esteem. And that’s hard enough! That’s a full time job, trying to live up to everyone’s expectations, and do all that we need to do to be worth something in their eyes.

And so it’s not easy to hear that before God, we are unworthy. And that, in fact, that’s the best that we can do! That when all is said and done, we’ll have said too much and done too little. That when all is said and done, even if we could have done all that we were commanded, are to say: *“We are unworthy servants; we have **only** done our duty.”*

For what is our duty? What is it that God commanded us and expects of us? It is to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* (Mt 22:37; Deut 6:5) And it is to *love your neighbor as yourself.* (Mt 22:39; Lev 19:18) And this not *some* of the time, or *most* of the time, but all of the time. Following God’s will, not your own; and His ways, not your ways. Or, as Jesus explained in the Holy Gospel today, it is not causing others to sin by your actions, nor encouraging or condoning their sin through your silence. It is forgiving them when they sin against you, no matter how many times; and not only letting go of the sin, but repaying them with good. It is gladly and joyfully serving. It is giving your goods to those in need; or perhaps what is today an even more precious commodity: giving your *time*. And not begrudgingly, or to tally up good will and considerations which may be

useful in the future – but as if there were no tomorrow. As if what you hold onto today will only be lost tomorrow.

And so it's true. And so we confessed it again this morning. *We are unworthy servants; we haven't even done our duty.* Not even close. . . . And no wonder the apostles responded as they did, asking Jesus to "*Increase our faith!*" For they (and we!) need *something!* We need something to help us do what we haven't been able to do! Maybe you've found yourself praying that same prayer . . .

But interesting how Jesus responds to that request . . . not by granting their request, but by pointing to the great power of even a small faith. Saying, "*If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.*" Now some will hear that line as *evidence* that we need a greater faith, and that that's what we should be working on, increasing our spiritual work-outs and pumping up our faith, for none of us have achieved that level of faith yet, have we? And so we try harder . . . but find that just makes us *fall* harder, and realize our unworthiness even more.

So it's important that we understand what Jesus is really saying here: that the answer to our unworthiness problem is not the size of our faith; the problem is who our faith is in. For you can have a faith that's like a 5,000 watt light bulb, but if you're plugged into an outlet that doesn't work, it really doesn't matter how powerful you are. But even if you're a little 15 watt bulb, as long as you're plugged into the right place, you're going to work and light up the room. And so if you're looking to the wattage of your faith for what you need, you're plugged into the wrong place, because your faith is really in yourself. So the answer is not to change to a more powerful bulb – the answer is to switch outlets. To quit looking to and relying on yourself and your efforts for your worthiness, and look to another.

And so we come here, to this place, and we don't sit in a circle, looking at each other – we sit facing this chancel. To focus not on ourselves, but precisely on another. And as you do, what do you see? You see the **font**, where instead of drowning us unworthy servants in the depth of the sea, our Lord drowns us in Holy Baptism, making unworthy servants worthy through the forgiveness of our sins. And you see the **altar**, where instead of demanding our service, our Lord comes and serves us, and feeds us with forgiveness, life, and salvation in His own body and blood. And you see the **tree** of the **cross**, where instead of looking to flying mulberry trees for evidence of how strong our faith is, we see the real strong One, who made mulberry

trees and you and me. The real strong One who became weak for us, being hurled into the depth of our sin and dying our death, in our place. That it might not be us. That we might not receive what we've earned, and what we rightfully deserve, but be given, instead, what is much greater, and what we could never be worthy of: the life of God in the forgiveness of our sin. That our faith be in Him and not in ourselves. In Him, and no where else.

For only in Him will we find that worthiness that we are so desperately looking for. Like the worthiness of Lazarus that we heard last week. Like the worthiness of the leper that we will hear next week. That worthiness that is not fleeting and fickle and that comes and goes with the changing values of those around us who may think one thing of us one day, and quite another thing the next. Which keeps us quite off-balance, and always striving, and always searching. No. It is quite different here, in Him. For here is not the place of millstones (which drag us down), but of the Cornerstone (which lifts us up!). Here is the place of the Son who became a servant, that we servants might become sons. Here is the place not of earnings, but of gifts. Where even faith as small as a mustard seed receives the life and strength of God our Saviour Himself.

And that makes even small faith strong. For the life and strength that we here receive is the life and strength that is greater than anything in this world. The life and strength that took away our sin, stripped satan of his power, and broke the seal of the grave. The life and strength that is strong to forgive, and powerful to serve. The life and strength of Christ that now lives in us.

Far too often, when we hear that phrase “unworthy servants” we focus on the *unworthy* part and so try to make ourselves *worthy* servants. But today, instead, focus not so much on what you **do** as who you **are**. That in Christ, you are no longer an unworthy *servant*, because you are no longer a servant at all! **But a son**. And you do what you do because of who you are; you do not become who you are by what you do. Sonship can't be earned; only given. And so you love, because that's who you are. You forgive, because that's who you are. You serve, because that's who you are. Doing these things not because you have to do *more*, but because you can do no *less*! Doing these things as sons who imitate their Father, and relying on Him. Unworthy servants no more.

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.