

23 September 2012  
Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Words That Make All the Difference in the World”  
Text: Mark 9:30-37 (Jeremiah 11:18-20; James 3:13-4:10)

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

As Jesus and His disciples were passing through Galilee, the disciples heard the most important sermon they could ever hear from Jesus. This is what it's all about. It's not about what *you* should do or not do, it's about what Jesus would do . . . and what He did. For you. ***The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.***

But the disciples didn't understand. Not yet. That what sounded like bad news was really the Good News. Oh, they understood all the words - they're simple enough. Jesus didn't use any big, complicated, theological words. But this didn't match what made sense to them. It didn't compute.

Because what they *did* understand - or so they *thought* - was greatness. And that, evidently, was on their mind, for they were arguing about which of *them* was the greatest. They probably all made their case. Andrew was called first, so isn't he the greatest? Well, Peter, James, and John were the three that got to see Jesus transfigured, so isn't it one of them? Add to that the fact that the other nine couldn't expel that demon we heard about last week, so it *couldn't* be one of them, right? Peter failed as often as he succeeded, John was older than his little brother James . . .

*Hey, what were you guys talking about?* Jesus asked. [Oops!] Oh man. Talk about the thunder of the Law. That's all He needed to say . . . and they knew. They knew each and every one of them had failed and fallen again.

Wanna know what they felt like? Picture being in a Nursing Home and hearing there's nothing more they can do for Grandma - she's going on hospice care. The kids then step out into the hallway and start arguing about who's getting the inheritance and how they should divide it up. And then when they go back in the room, Grandma asks: *What were you talking about out there?*

What are you going to say? Lie? That might work with Grandma, but not with Jesus.

And the truth is: we've done this. *Actually* maybe we're worse than the disciples. They didn't understand, though maybe they should have by now? But it hadn't happened yet . . . and Jesus hadn't explained it all to them yet like He would after the resurrection . . . and the Holy Spirit hadn't been pentecosted to them yet. But you and me? We know the story. We know why Jesus came. We know what happened. We hear it each and every week. And we not only know it's *for* us, it's happened *to* us. We've been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection and have received His Holy Spirit. We receive the Body and Blood of Jesus that hung on the cross and rose from the grave. We receive the forgiveness He won for us there. Those same twelve disciples turned apostles, those same twelve struck-down greatness arguers, who learned and lived this and have preached this all to us in the New Testament . . . that we might believe . . . that (could we say?) we might even *learn* from their mistakes . . .

And yet . . . what are we arguing about on the way? Do we hear about and look at Jesus on the cross here, and maybe even bow our heads and bodies - and certainly our hearts - to Him here, but then go out and argue and worry and go after . . . *what?* Greatness, honor, rights, possessions, wants, satisfaction? What I want over what she wants? What I need before what he needs? And how quickly do we? Maybe even on the way home? Do Jesus and His cross stay behind in Vienna while we go out and pursue our own self-serving agendas? *Hey, what did you guys talk about and do this week?*

There is only one answer to that question. And you said it earlier; you confessed it earlier. *O God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

And that *gentle lamb led to the slaughter* does have mercy. That's why He came. For all the times we forget Him, He never forgets you. For all the times we turn away from Him, He never turns away from you. For all the times we serve ourselves, He never stops serving you. And if we were to ask Him: *Hey, what were you doing this week?* His answer would be: *taking care of you.* At work, at school, at home, at play, asleep, awake, on the golf course, in the hospital, His merciful hand never left you.

For you are His child, made so in Holy Baptism. And Jesus' greatness is in serving you - serving you with His forgiveness, life, and salvation. That sin, death, and satan *harm* you no more. That although those things do come and they *hurt*, often very deeply, they can *harm* you no more. For they are all now subject to Him who defeated them in His death and resurrection.

But satan doesn't want you to think about that or believe it. Instead, he would like you to think that your sins are too big, too frequent, or too many to be forgiven, or that death is too strong to be conquered, or that you're too weak to be a Christian,

too filled with doubts and worries, or that Jesus' victory is hollow and fake because look at all the trouble in your life and in the world today . . . what victory exactly is it that you think you have, you silly Christian?!

*Do you see?* In all those ways, satan is trying to get us to buy into his vision and version of greatness, *and that (obviously) you're not it!* And if you're not it, then neither is your so-called Saviour, Jesus. And all His promises to you? Well, they must not even be worth the paper they're written on.

And if satan is right about greatness, and that it is in what we achieve or what we are or the victories that we win . . . well then he's right. We will never be able to answer the question: *Hey, what did you guys talk about and do this week?* good enough.

But what Jesus said about greatness is exactly the opposite of all that. For He said, ***"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."*** And He was talking about himself. For no matter how hard you try - *no matter how hard you try* - you can never do this. Because even *trying* to do this, trying to be last and servant of all, you'd be doing it in order to be first and great and so you've failed even before you get started!

No, there's only one who could do this: the One who is first and so doesn't need to worry about getting there. The One who is over all, and so doesn't need to worry about himself. That One, then, came and did this for you who could not do it. He became the last, the lowest of the low by bearing the sin of all the world, of all people, of all of you, on the cross. He became the last, the servant of all by taking the wrath and punishment and condemnation for all those sins and dying for them. Which is to say, Jesus took your place so that you could have His place. He did it to make you first. To make you a child of God. To give you the kingdom of heaven and the promise of eternal life.

And all that He gives to you. That's what *I forgive you* means. That's what *I baptize you* means. That's what *receiving a foretaste of the feast to come* in the Lord's Supper means. It means He who is first became last for you, and you who are last are now first.

And if that's true - *and it is!* And if Christ has given that to you - *and He has!* Then arguing about greatness? That's like - and please forgive this analogy but I couldn't think of a better one - that's like arguing which of us can go out and pick up the biggest pile of dog manure! Because that's what our greatness, what we can do, is compared to the greatness we have received from Jesus. And do you *really* wanna argue about that?

You know, I sometimes joke with people that I don't expect you to remember my sermons because *I* don't even remember what I preached last week! And that's true because once one sermon is done, my mind moves on to the next one. But also (in a sense) it's not true - because I *do* remember what I preached last week. I may not remember *how* I preached it, or the particulars of it, but I know what I preached was this: ***The Son of Man was delivered into the hands of men, and they killed him. And after he was killed, after three days he rose from the dead.***

Like with the disciples that day in Galilee, that's the most important sermon you could ever hear. It's the most important sermon you need to hear. And yes, over and over again. Because Satan is working really hard to make you forget it, and make you think it's not really true or doesn't really matter. But these are the words that make all the difference in the world. Because they mean you have a life that no one or no thing can ever take away from you. Satan lies - that what he does. Jesus gives life - that what He does.

*So what were you arguing about?* It doesn't really matter, does it?

But that cup of cold water you gave, that helping hand, those forgiving words, that comforting embrace, that meaningful time, why'd you do that? To *be* great? No. But because you *are* great. In Christ. Because His words make all the difference in the world, and make all the difference in you.

So having received those forgiving, baptismal words again in the Absolution, and having received those words again in Scripture and sermon, come now and receive that word - *the Word made flesh* - in the Body and Blood of our Lord in His Supper. Grace upon grace. Always enough and yet never enough. The great for the needy that the needy be great. Yes now and even forevermore.

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.