

Jesu Juva

“The Greatness of the Liturgy Is Jesus”

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

Note: Today we did our annual Narrative Divine Service in which we explain what we do and why we do what we do in the liturgy. This sermon ties into that theme.

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

Today we are taking a look at the liturgy - what it is we do and why we do it; what the liturgy is all about. Which is good, because many people are confused about the Church and her liturgy, her worship. Some think that what we're doing here we're doing for God, serving Him. Others think what we do in church is merely sociological, that each of us receives a benefit from what we do together. Like a club. And still others think it should be entertainment, like so much else in this world and life. But as you heard earlier, it is none of those things. The liturgy is all about Jesus. Jesus forgiving sins. Jesus speaking His Word. Jesus feeding us with His Body and Blood. Jesus serving sinners, giving us exactly what we need the most.

But folks are confused about Jesus too, thinking that Jesus is all about making our lives better, happier, and more productive. That we have more satisfying relationships and better friends. That Jesus is all about social justice, liberation, or positive thinking. That we feel good about ourselves. It's not wrong to want those things, Jesus can do those things, and many Christians work for those things as part of loving and serving their neighbor. But again, as you heard, that's not first and foremost why Jesus came. Not first and foremost what Jesus is all about. Jesus is all about the cross and the tomb; about death and resurrection. As Jesus taught his disciples: ***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.***

And Jesus came not only *knowing* that would happen to Him, but *so that* it would happen to Him. Unlike Jeremiah, who, as we heard, ***did not know the schemes*** his opponents were devising against him, Jesus knew what was happening and why it was happening. That the religious leaders of His day thought they were serving God by cutting Him down and out of the religious life of Israel. And in much the same way, those today who cut out from the Church any mention of sin and forgiveness, of cross and death, of what Jesus is really all about, think they too are serving God; attracting people and making things better. But not so. What they are preaching cannot help and what they are offering cannot save.

But it's not only "them," it's us too. The twelve who were Jesus' most intimate friends and followers *were arguing about who was the greatest*. How often do we make the same mistake and focus on the wrong things - focusing too much on the things of this world, the greatness of this world, the life of this world; wanting to be great in treasure, great in position, great in power, rather than great *in Jesus* and the life He has come to bring? And when we do, those things we heard from James sprout up in our lives: *bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, pride, coveting, and fighting*. For if we want the greatness of this world, we will not like it when others get what we want.

So Jesus takes a child and puts him right in the middle of them. He hugs him, and then says: *Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me*.

In contrast to that, please take note that what is happening in our country - and in some ways in our world - today. Children are not being received and served, but sacrificed. It used to be almost a given that parents gave up much and laid down their lives for their children, sacrificing for them - sacrificing time, sacrificing treasure, sacrificing sleep - to give them a better life. And that still happens. But also today, in many ways, the tables have turned, and children are being sacrificed to give adults a better life. Sacrificed at the altar of sinful pleasures. Sacrificed at the altar of selfish ambitions. Sacrificed at the altar of medical research and technology. Sacrificed at the altar of political correctness and social progress.

Very different than that is the tradition about a man named Lawrence who lived in the time of the early church. He was a deacon in the church and in charge of the treasury. The emperor at the time thought it a good idea for himself to have the money that church had, and so he commanded Lawrence to bring all the church's treasure to him the next day. So Lawrence gathered all the poor and all the children together and brought them to the emperor, proclaiming: *here are all the treasures of the church*. And for that he got killed; placed over a fire and slowly roasted alive. Lawrence got the Jesus treatment. But Lawrence got it right.

And us too. We need to get it right. Not just life or iturgy, what we do or what we teach, but both. For they go together. Always. And if they don't, something's wrong.

And so Jesus said: *if anyone would be first, if anyone would be the greatest, he must be last of all and servant of all*; he must be the least. That's what Jesus taught and that's what He did, all the way to the shame and humiliation of the cross. There serving us, His children, and His children of all time. Regarding us as great and worth sacrificing everything for. Taking our sin upon Himself that we be forgiven. Sacrificing His life to reverse our death. Becoming an outcast, forsaken by men and His own Father, that we be adopted into His family and have a home. That we be great in His kingdom, not this one. That we live forever, not just 70, 80, or 90 years.

And for that Jesus not only came and went to the cross some 2,000 years ago, He comes to us here and now with the fruits of that cross, with all that He earned and won for us on that cross: with the forgiveness and life we need. And where He has promised to come and be is here, *where two or three are gathered in His name* (Matthew 18:20). Where His Word is proclaimed, baptism given, absolution pronounced, His Body placed into hungry mouths and His Blood poured over sin-parched lips. Surely this is not the *only* place Jesus is, but we have His promise that He is here. We don't have to hope He'll show up, or make sure He will by doing everything exactly right. We know that He is; that He's here with His Word, His gifts, His presence.

And as we have been hearing, the liturgy provides for that and confesses that. The liturgy is all about Jesus and His gifts for His children of all ages. So it matters what we do here. It matters. There's no one right way, but there are many wrong ways. But in the end, what matters is not that we leave here feeling good, pumped up, or filled with positive thinking. But that we leave here knowing that we have been in the presence of Jesus and have received His gifts. That my many and horrible sins are forgiven, and should I die today or tomorrow or the next day, my life is safe in Him. For He who died and rose will raise me too. He, the greatest, became the least, so that I, the least, may be great.

And then filled with those gifts and that confidence, it really doesn't matter which one of us is the greatest, does it? We've been in the presence of the greatest, and He has served us. Now we can go and serve others in the same way, and love one another as He has loved us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.