

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week we heard in the Gospel Reading from Matthew, chapter 16, these words: *“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* Peter and the disciples didn’t respond well to the Lord’s teaching. They are more than thrilled that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Yet, a suffering Messiah is a big problem to them. *“This shall never happen to You,”* Peter exclaims. And so, Jesus corrects their misguided beliefs, saying to them: *“You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”* Then he adds the kicker, *“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.”*

Then in Matthew, chapter 17, we hear Jesus announcing to the disciples for the second time the end goal of His ministry: *“The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.”* And the disciples’ reaction? *“They were greatly distressed.”*

In today’s reading, the disciples arrive in Capernaum – Jesus’ home base for His ministry in Galilee. The disciples still, however, haven’t got it – that Jesus would take away the sins of the world through suffering. Instead, they ask Him selfishly: *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* In Matthew, chapter 16, the disciples don’t understand Jesus. Neither do they in chapter 17. And now, here in Matthew, chapter 18, it is clear that they don’t understand themselves. This time their misguided question shows they still have in mind the *“things of man”* – worldly success, being the greatest, winner of the ‘disciple of the year’ award.

And so, Jesus must continue to teach them, and also us, the *“things of God.”* This especially includes what being ‘the greatest’ in God’s kingdom means and involves.

“And calling to him a child, [Jesus] put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”

What is greatness about when it comes to God’s kingdom? It’s certainly doesn’t have anything to do with earthly riches, health, position/ personal success, getting our own way. Is greatness then about being humble like a child, simply trusting and believing . . . having faith like a child? To be sure, Jesus sets a child in the disciples’ midst and says, *“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”*; but this has less to do with how humble, trusting, and believing children are than it does about Whom these children humbly trust in and believe.

Yes, children can honor their parents. They can serve them with humility. Children can also be quite selfish and self-serving—just like adults. And while children often believe what their parents tell them, many of these same children grow up to question what their parents have told them—wanting to ‘find out for themselves’ whether the Bible is true . . . and whether there is any truth to this ‘Jesus stuff’. So taking all that into consideration, this side of children is not what Jesus is getting at.

Jesus brings a child before the disciples here not because of any particular innocence or virtue of children; but rather, to show how completely dependent children are upon those who care for them. Rather than *acting* humbly, children simply *are* humble because of their position in the family and society. Herein lies the greatness of being like children: their need is the greatest. They can’t provide anything for themselves and must depend entirely upon those who care for them. In other words, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the neediest.

And Jesus should know. The infant Jesus Himself had to rely on His stepfather Joseph to escape to Egypt from the murderous intentions of ol’ King Herod. He was born into the neediness of humanity, dependent on His mother Mary and her husband Joseph for His life and well-being until He stretched out His arms, bearing all

of human need upon the cross from which He could only pray, *“Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit.”* What does this mean? Just this: the greatest disciple is the one who is aware of his weakness. The greatest disciple knows he is weak, humble and lowly, dependent on God and wholly reliant on Jesus. In the difficult life of discipleship and bearing crosses, there are times and situations in which disciples will be especially beaten down by sin, by evil, by the devil . . . and they find themselves in dire need. These little ones, when they recognize their weakness and their need for God and put themselves in his hands are truly the greatest.

When you understand that you have no hope except in Jesus’ death and resurrection, it is there and then that you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. When your family is disjointed and torn apart . . . when your marriage once stable seems to be slipping away . . . when your children are pushing back until it feels you can no longer reach them . . . when your parents are full of anger and distant and no longer care . . . when your body doesn’t want to keep going . . . when your loved ones are fading and suddenly leaving this world . . . when horrid memories of misspent younger years attack unrelentingly . . . when your past constantly comes back to haunt you . . . when you feel forgotten by everyone and don’t know if you will make it through the week . . . when you can’t rescue others from their vicious cycles . . . when it seems that all you have are a gravestone and a few photos . . . when you have no more strength and nothing to give but life doesn’t ease up on its demands, don’t try harder!

Instead, confess your every need and your inability to solve or to escape your problems. Remember your baptism, where you could do nothing for yourself and yet the Lord gave you everything and you became the greatest in the kingdom of God. Indeed, Jesus says, *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”* And so, gladly kneel before your Father as the neediest beggar with empty hands and receive from His Son’s outstretched arms the greatest gift imaginable – the very body and blood and the Real Presence of Christ that permeates and is infused in every last corner of your life. And stay on your knees, as it were, in full and complete dependence upon

the Father's love to care for your every need and guide you through every joy and sorrow. In 2 Corinthians, St. Paul says: *"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

In God's kingdom, your surpassing needs as His dear child are always met in the only way possible – the Son of God takes on all your needs by dying and rising again. Each day in your great need recall with Peter, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

As God's little children, we are truly dependent on him for all things. That's ok, because our Lord is the one on whom we can depend! Amen.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him. Amen.

Pastor Ron Bright Christ Lutheran Church Forest Hills, Pennsylvania

Acknowledge to the Lutheran Church in Canada for material for this sermon. To join us for worship online, visit our website christlutheranfh.org, click the blue Facebook link at the bottom of the page, and you will be taken to our Facebook page. There is no need to sign up for Facebook to view the services. You can view our 10 am Sunday service live or watch it later at your convenience. God bless!