

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2020 Matthew 18:1-20

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. In this part of Matthew's gospel Jesus' disciples are having a bit of trouble coming to terms with Jesus' teaching on his suffering and death. They are also not happy that he does not promise them a glorious life on earth either. After they confessed Jesus to be the savior God had promised to send, Jesus turns everything on its head. Jesus tells them that he is going to suffer abuse from the establishment and then be killed. The disciples' response is essentially, "No way Hosea! Stamp out that idea like a used cigarette butt. You and we disciples are gonna make Israel great again." They intended to change their world for the better with the power of the Almighty! Yeah!! Go team Jesus!!

Then comes a dose of reality. Jesus informs them they do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. Jesus continues that thought here;

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "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 they were greatly distressed. Matthew 17:22-23

Those disciples didn't like that kind of talk. All this killing, dying and such. They were greatly distressed over all this bad news. However, they were not SO distressed they couldn't ask Jesus the next question recorded in today's gospel;

At that time, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Matthew 18:1

They were back to their same ol' song and dance – all about their greatness. Just like us. It's true - we still think this way even in the church. Anyone who denies there is a pecking order of greatness in the church is perhaps a bit naïve. It's that way in every church on earth.

Sometimes greatness is given to others. Pastors are sometimes viewed as greater than the rest of the congregation. The Bible says pastors need to be respected because they have been placed there by the Lord, but they are human just like everyone else. The same greatness can be ascribed to other church workers or to people who have a pastor or teacher in the family. Elders are often viewed as greater than the other congregants. The same goes for the hardest workers, those with the strongest faith, who give the most money, or who have been members the longest. It sometimes also happens to the

most handsome or most beautiful people. These days perhaps the greatest of all in the church are families with young children! They have become somewhat rare.

While some may be held up in the eyes of the people as greater than others, we individually run the risk of viewing ourselves as greater than others for the exact same reasons others may think of us as great.

So we have a lot in common with these disciples! Well, as usual, Jesus turns everything on its head;

And calling to him a child, he 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. Matthew 18:2-4

Hmmm ... Maybe we didn't see that one coming! Jesus says that whoever becomes like a child is the greatest. What does he mean when he talks about becoming like a child? I came across one person's thoughts on becoming like a child that illustrates how easily we can misunderstand what Jesus means about becoming like a child. The person said that after spending time with his young grandchildren, it became obvious to him what Jesus meant. His main question became the age which Jesus had in mind when he said for us to become like children. Could Jesus have meant a toddler? Toddlers seem so pure, exceptionally loving, and unspoiled. I guess this man must have done well in the grandchildren department. You know that's what we all think of when we hear Jesus telling us to become like a child. But that's not what Jesus meant. We will never be pure, innocent, all-loving, or unspoiled. It's far too late for us to be that way and we know it. That ship sailed a long time ago. For us today little children are cuddly, sweet, innocent, pure, loving, and unspoiled. But Jesus wasn't talking to us here in 2020. He was talking to people living in ancient times. For them, children were seen differently. Children DID NOT have any positive qualities to be copied. Little children can't do much other than filling diapers and making all kinds of messes. They can't farm, chop wood, cook, clean, fetch water, fight in wars or count money. Rather, THEY had to be clothed, fed, cleaned, and constantly guarded. When life was hard like it was back then, that was a lot of extra baggage to carry around.

We hear about kings killing their children because they're potential heirs to the throne and we shudder in horror. Back then - not so much. That part of the Christmas story where Herod tries to find and kill the baby Jesus, and kills other baby boys in the process, it almost ruins the whole Christmas story. Back then, that kind of thing just happened. Children were like property.

So what then did Jesus have in mind when he said that we are to become like children? He meant for us to consider ourselves as totally dependent on God, like a young child is totally dependent on parents. We consider ourselves absolutely powerless and helpless when it comes to spiritual matters. Like a toddler is totally dependent on parents for care, we consider ourselves 100% dependent on God for everything. That's what Jesus means. It's what he teaches in the beatitudes when he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

So now what? What is life in the church all about? First, we humbled ourselves like little children, casting aside all claims of greatness before God or in this congregation - greatness given or greatness we have claimed for ourselves. Then we fall at the feet of Jesus' cross. Looking up, we see him hanging there -the one who was counted least in the kingdom of God – and thus became our only source of hope for a life with God. We hang all our hopes on him who put all his hope in his Father to deliver him from death and hell. Second, we search for the others among us who are helpless and in need. This includes those who have humbled themselves beneath the cross of Jesus as well as those who are helpless and weak in their faith. Jesus says;

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Matthew 18:5-6

Jesus teaches us to receive people who are like children in the right way: Humbled disciples of the Lord; Those who are beaten down from the cross they carry; Those in great need of help. The list also includes the sick, injured, aged, or in material need. We add those who suffer from a weak faith and are about to give up on God and those have lost the feeling of need for God in their life such as inactive members, And those whose flame of hope and joy in life is almost extinguished. These are the little ones Jesus is talking about who for us should be considered the greatest in the kingdom of God.

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. Matthew 18:10

We are to be on the lookout for the greatest in the kingdom, the ones who are least in the eyes of the world.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. Matthew 18:12-14

It is just like Jesus said – he came to seek and to save the lost. If we want to be great – and we all do in our own way – we turn and repent for the times we claimed to have enough to offer God so that he should, in turn, help us. Then we dedicate ourselves to totally relying on Jesus to help us in each and every way. Finally, we look to the world to find those who need the help and love of God.

These truths also apply to church life. If we want our church to be great - and Jesus never says we shouldn't be great - we don't focus on larger attendance, bigger offerings, or a renewed Sunday school program. Rather, we focus on identifying those who are the least in the kingdom and we come to their aid, just like Jesus came to ours. We bring them the help and strength of God.

We also give thanks and praise to God for acting in the same way he instructs us. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We were in the chains of slavery and could not do the works of God. All in all, we would have been considered of little or no use to God and the purposes of his kingdom. Yet that is exactly why he came to save us. He saw our great need and hopeless situation and has saved us, freed us, and given us a place at his table. Indeed, all thanks and praise and glory to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Ron Breight, Pastor
Christ Lutheran Church
400 Barclay Avenue
Forest Hills, Pennsylvania