

Pentecost 14 Matthew 18 “Child-like” September 6 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

This all gets started with a question, a question which portrays the disciples as a little slow, but which gives Jesus an occasion to launch into a discourse which centers around the Christian community which he is addressing through Matthew. The disciples want to know which of them is the top dog. They are jockeying for position.

When Mark tells the story, they were arguing on the road and had obviously been trying to figure out which of them was the greater. Matthew is not concerned with that part of it; he wants us to hear Jesus answer. They must turn and become like children or they won't even get in, forget being great. They won't even have a place in that kingdom. Christ's kingdom is in this sense really upside down from their experience and expectations. One must humble himself and become like a child.

Child-like. In the ancient world, **children were not thought to be innocent!** They were considered weak and helpless. Those are the characteristics of a child. When Jesus exhorts them to be child-like, he is talking about assuming a posture of weakness and helplessness. Until I am nothing, God makes something of me. Being humble I am great, but as soon as I tell you that I am the humblest person in the world, it rather defeats the whole purpose doesn't it? As Martin Luther said, “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ. Jesus is talking about a world, His kingdom, which operates on a completely different reality than we are used to. It is the theology of the cross.

This kingdom operates on a strange dynamic in which my disqualifications are my qualifications. I am helpless before my sin, and the faster I am brought to see that the faster I am made holy and perfect by Christ. I confess that I am a poor, miserable sinner. My boasting is not in what I am or have done. My boasting is always in Christ, who He is and what He has done, including restoring life and righteousness to me.

While on the topic of children, Jesus has more to say. These little ones are important to him; that is what makes them great in the kingdom. We may not think the child to be worth much, at least not as much as a man. That is nowhere more evident than in our abortion laws. Inconvenience is reason enough to terminate a pregnancy. As awful as it is today, that was even more true in the ancient world which never would have had a saying like “women and children first” when it came to filling lifeboats on a sinking ship. It was survival of the fittest, and every man for himself. Jesus calls forth a different sort of world, and I praise God that in some respects our western culture has adopted and ingrained some of these mind-sets into its own ethos.

Jesus is addressing our fundamental helplessness before our sin. Like little children, we are weak and defenseless before this.

The Greek has a strange construction at the end of our Gospel reading in verse 20: it literally reads: I with them AM.

This also shows up at Matthew 28:16-20 which was the reading for the Festival of the Holy Trinity earlier this summer. And also at the beginning of Matthew where he calls Jesus Immanuel or “God with us.”

Norman Nagel at Concordia St. Louis has suggested that this is deliberate on Matthew’s part. “I AM” or “Ego eimi” in Greek, is the LXX way of expressing the name which God uttered for Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. It is the very name of God. If you look at it, the people who are gathered (united) in the name of Jesus are literally inside the name of God. That is a very good place to be. It makes for a very good baptismal sort of theology. In Holy Baptism we are placed in the middle of God’s name, we are in Him and He is in us.

Are you a child? In the wrong circumstances that would definitely be an insult. But in our relationship to God, it is not. In that relationship, through the washing of water and the Spirit, the Holy Spirit promises to lead us to live in the humility of daily confession and absolution as the weak and helpless children to whom God gives the very Kingdom of Heaven.

Dispense with the “children are innocent” nonsense. They are not. It is our helplessness before sin that makes us child-like in Jesus eyes. We are not able to stand before our sin and what it does to us. We are helpless before it, and like little children, we cannot feed, clothe, or care for ourselves in this spiritual sense.

But God declares to us today that this is exactly the state He expects and delights in. He is not looking for the spiritually competent, but the man or woman who is helpless before their sins. He counts us competent in His power and righteousness; He lifts us up from our helplessness; He stands us up in our humility; He is the one who accomplishes this. Competent people depend on themselves and not on God. That is pride; true belief comes out of a humble spirit and a contrite heart that counts on God for salvation and receives it by faith.

Such child-likeness then changes the way that we see this whole world. Sinners are all children – beloved of God. I do not despise the sinner/child. I cannot do that without despising myself! Jesus has not despised the sinner/child, rather He speaks of a shepherd who goes looking for the helpless and the lost. He found me. He found you. Today through your words of confession and His Word of forgiveness and love, He is finding more lost sheep.

People grasp for greatness. Millions are spent on the fastest race car team. Millions are spent on buying and training winning sports teams. Not many people would argue with legendary football coach Vince Lombardi’s line: “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” In the eyes of the world, taking second place is just another name for losing. People grasp at greatness. So powerful is the desire to be great, or to own something that provides greatness, people are willing to pursue it at great expense or risk great danger to achieve it. We grasp at greatness. We desire “likes” on our Facebook page.

It has been that way, almost since the beginning of time. The Bible tells us that Satan desired to be as great as God, and thus Satan stumbled into his sin of rebellion, and was cast out. It was a desire to be as knowledgeable as the Lord, which led our first ancestors, Adam and Eve to take a bite out of the forbidden fruit. Their search for greatness introduced into this world, and into our lives the sins of envy, greed, lust, prejudice, and hatred. Behaviors which are displayed when trying to act greater than someone else

Look through your Bible. It is positively filled with people who got involved with issues of greatness. The brothers Isaac and Esau got into a family feud as to which would receive a special blessing. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because they believed he considered himself to be better than they. King Saul struggled for supremacy over David.

Neither Jesus' disciples nor we ourselves escape this insatiable desire to put ourselves first, to seek to be the greatest. But Jesus was on a mission, sent by the Creator of the universe, His father, to seek and save people who are alienated from the love of their Creator. His life, death and resurrection provide an open gate into heaven. Jesus kept telling the disciples that He was going to Jerusalem where He would be arrested, tried, crucified, and murdered, and then rise on the third day, in order to reestablish peace and forgiveness between human beings and our God.

They did not understand and so their conversations and their arguments centered around themselves and their pride and egos. Rather than seeing Jesus as the only person worthy of the title "Great", they fought and feuded over which of them would be #1 in the new kingdom Jesus was going to establish. They wanted to know who was going to drive the Tesla, who was going to be in the driver's seat.

Eventually Jesus had enough and asked them to tell Him what they were talking about. Shamefaced, they mumbled something like, "Well, Lord, we were sort of wonderin' which of us is going to be Your Right-hand man and which of us ought to be sending out our resumes? Jesus was patient. "unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven....

Don't be "childish." Become like the little child. What did Jesus mean? He certainly wasn't talking about innocence or patience or obedience. Jesus was talking about the faith and trust that little children often display. I recall throwing my son, high in the air. Every time my son came down, I caught him. We did it over and over again. His laughter was constant. He'd say: "One more time, do it again." He trusted his father. He trusted that I would never drop him. A little child's trust in his parent's is often complete. That is what Jesus meant. Trust me. Be humble and quit seeking to be #1.

Jesus loves the little children; He cares for them, welcomes them, and embraces them. Jesus becomes indignant at those who mistreat them. Jesus is the little child's best friend. His blessing has brought its benediction wherever his name has been heard. Christianity has always been the religion that safeguarded the rights of children.

Wherever the gospel goes it honors families, it raises up motherhood, it protects and preserves the place of children. Wherever Christ is known and trusted and followed, and where his example is the model, there infancy is sacred and children are protected.

Jesus wants us to not grasp for 1st place, but to be servants to one another. Jesus call us to "become like the child" in complete humility, admitting our helplessness, and trusting in His love.

Humility, total dependence, complete honesty, without pride, trusting in His love. Those are the qualities that He seeks. And those are the things He empowers in us through Word and Sacrament. No conditions, no deals, by grace, through faith, in Christ alone.

Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong; They are weak but He is strong.
This verse tells about our relationship to Jesus.
This next verse tells how Jesus saves us:

Jesus loves me! He who died, Heaven's gate to open wide;

He will wash away my sin, Lets His little child come in.

And the chorus is a wonderful affirmation of faith:

Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus Loves me! The Bible tells me so.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide with you to life everlasting. Amen!