

September 10, 2023
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 18:1-20

GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM

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

Our Gospel text this morning covers of a lot of important teaching. We could easily go paragraph by paragraph and have a two-hour sermon or even a multi-week sermon series. But in the interest of time, I'm going to focus on one question. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? That's the question that Jesus' disciples ask in our text.

The desire to know exactly where **you** stand in the pecking order among your peers is nothing new. But what exactly does it mean to be the greatest? We usually think of greatness in terms of achievement and accomplishment. Great people accomplish great things. In sports the great ones out-perform all the other athletes. In business the great ones are the inventive entrepreneurs who change the world faster, better, and cheaper than their competitors. In politics, the greatest ones are the ones who make history by changing the course of history for the better.

Unfortunately among Christians you and I like to attempt to determine who is the greatest among fellow believers. Who is the greatest Christian here at St Timothy? Who can best articulate the Christian faith and its many doctrines? Who among us demonstrates the greatest faith, never showing worry or doubt? Who has the most Bible passages memorized? Who lives an outwardly pious and holy life with no obvious sin? The fact is, if you place your confidence in any of these things I just mentioned, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In our Gospel text, Jesus flips mankind's faulty wisdom regarding the greatest on its head. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus calls a child to Himself and puts him in the midst of them and says:

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

This is not a proof text that little children are sinless until the age of accountability. Don't think that Jesus is saying that children are positive role models for adults. It has only been in the last several years that the devil has deceived people into thinking that children should be autonomous in their decision making. It goes something like this. [sarcasm on →] *“If little junior believes he's a pirate, by golly let's get him liquored up with rum, gouge out his eye and cut off his leg. Junior, your preferred pronouns are now “Hook” and “Black Beard.” Come along! Let's get an eye patch and peg leg for you.”* [← sarcasm off] But that's a sermon for another day.

The important thing to know here is that in the culture of that day, suggesting that someone become like a child would be shocking and offensive. First century Jews viewed children as inferior. It's not that moms and dads didn't love their children. They did! But children were weak. They were needy. They had no social status or influence over others. The classical world placed a high value on reason. Therefore, children were regarded as inferior because they're not guided by rational thinking. They're not capable of anything. They're gullible. They cannot care for themselves. They cannot provide for themselves. A child has nothing, and needs everything. A child is utterly dependent upon the care of others.

Who is the greatest? Jesus says it's whoever becomes like a little child. He's speaking in the sense of becoming as one of complete dependence. Becoming one who possesses nothing but needs everything, utterly relying of someone else.

Who is the greatest? Is it you? Do you have claims to make? What are your bragging rights? Don't you have just a little bit of pride that you made it to church on time this morning? Or that you've made it to church several Sundays in a row now? Certainly you're holier than ol' so and so who never shows up. And not just you but it's your whole family who really has their pious act together.

No. That's being the greatest in the mind of the old Adam... being greatest in the world. Being greatest in the kingdom of God... being greatest under the reign of God in Christ Jesus is contrary to sinful human reason. Throw away your comparisons. Stop with all the competing. Shred your resumé with all your achievements and accomplishments, accolades and awards. If you approach Jesus with something in your hands to prove yourself, you'll be sent away empty. But if you come to Jesus in faith, with nothing but your sin and your guilt and your shame, you'll receive everything He has to give.

Becoming a child means being utterly dependent on Christ. It means you no longer look at yourself but instead look to the reign of God in Christ Jesus and confess to Him that you cannot fix your problems yourself. You cannot make them go away. You cannot save yourself. Confess that you need Jesus. You need a Savior to protect you and to forgive you and to save you from your own self.

Now, of course all people, whether they trust and believe in Jesus or not, are totally dependent on God all of the time, even if they are ignorant of their dependence. Secondly, Jesus is not saying that you must take on a life of poverty, self-torture, and self-pity. No He has created you for a purpose. You are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for you to do. (cf: Ephesians 2:10)

A key word in our text is in verse three. The word "*turn*." Jesus says:

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children..." (Matthew 18:3)

In the original language this word translated as *turn* means: "*... to experience an inward change.*" (BDAG, 948-949) In his Concordia Commentary on Matthew's Gospel, Jeffery Gibbs writes:

“In this context, “to turn” means “to repent” just as God often spoke through the Old Testament prophets... literally, “to turn,” as a summons to “repent.” (e.g., Is 31:6; Jer 3:12; Ezek 14:6; 18:30; Hos 14:2–3 [ET 14:1–2]). Here Jesus’ call to repentance applies both to those who are already disciples and to unbelievers.” (Gibbs, Matthew 11:2–20:34, Concordia Commentary, 898)

This **turning**, this repentance, is an action of the heart, one that is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit, creating within you a clean heart and renewing a right spirit within you (cf: Psalm 51:10) so that you might set your mind on the things that are right and, by the Spirit’s merciful guiding, accomplish them. (cf: Collect of the Day, Proper 18A)

Another key word is in verse four. The word **“humble.”** Jesus says:

“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:4)

In the original language this word translated as **humble** means: ***“... make low; assign someone or oneself to a lower place... or voluntary submission as humbling oneself.”*** (ANLEX 375)

The one who humbles themselves has no claims and makes no demands. They recognize they have nothing and need everything. You recognize that you are powerless to save yourself. But as a disciple of Jesus, you confess Jesus as the Christ and you take up your own cross and follow Him in this difficult world and life of discipleship, expecting for their to be times and situations in which you will find yourself especially beaten down by sin and evil and the devil. When you find yourself in a time of dire need, when your abilities, riches, and reputation will not help you, when all of your false idols are gone – you have Jesus. And He is all that you really need.

Jesus knew no sin, but for your sake God made Him to be sin so that in Him you might become the righteousness of God. (cf: 2 Corinthians 5:21) He made no claims. He came with no demands. He is the One who had everything and needed nothing, but because of the love He has for you, He became the One who had nothing and needed everything. St Paul writes:

“... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5–8)

Jesus came for struggling and needy people just like you and me. It is only to those who realize that they have nothing that God offers everything. To become like a child means to repent of your pride, acknowledge your humble need for God’s grace, and look to Christ for salvation and the saving reign of God, throughout this present life until His return on the Last Day.

Christ Jesus comes to you this morning in the remembrance of your baptismal promises, in His Word of absolution that all your sins of personal greatness, your pride, position, and prominence are forgiven. He comes to you in His humble Word proclaimed. He comes in His body and blood – in, with, and under the lowly means of bread and wine. Christ crucified for you. He submitted to His Father’s will with no demands. He humbled Himself unto death and is now raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:20)

Just as God in Christ Jesus loves and serves you, He calls you and all His little children to love and serve their neighbor. Who is the greatest among us? It's the one with the deepest sorrow. That one is the greatest. Comfort them. The greatest among us is the sick and the suffering. Pray for them and care for them. Remind them of the love that God has for them in Christ Jesus. The greatest among us is the brother or the sister in Christ who is being deceived or lured by temptation. Go after them and build them up and gently bring them back.

Turning and becoming little children is hard for us hard-headed adults, and that includes the hard-hearted persons we are from the moment of conception, at birth, and at any age throughout life. In fact, it's impossible for us to turn. But it has already happened, that Jesus, the only Son of the Father, has made you a child of the kingdom in the waters of Baptism where He reaches down and unites you to Himself in His death. And if you have been united with Him in a death like His, you shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His on the Last Day. (cf: Romans 6:5) Until then, we seek out the greatest in our midst and care for one another.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.