

Sunday: Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: September 6, 2020

Text: Matthew 18:1-20

Title: The Greatest?

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

The kingdom of God is unique. If we look around us, we see there is nothing like it. From the means of entry into the kingdom, to the ongoing maintenance of membership it baffles “human” wisdom. The identification of who is most important in the kingdom makes us scratch our heads. In earthly activities, the greatest is the one who is most capable, or most educated, most popular, or richest. We tend to live by the gold standard. He who has the gold sets the standard. The gold standard is not limited to wealth. Gold can be characterized as influence, power, intelligence, looks, or money. Gold is the thing that sets people over others. Many times, it is the means for exploiting, dominating or misleading followers. The world embraces people in power, often imbuing them with wisdom they do not truly possess.

Power is not the capital by which Jesus builds his church. In the Gospels, Jesus frequently chastised the religious leaders of the day for lording their power over the people. Instead of caring for the Israelites, they sought fame, glory, and wealth at the expense of widows, orphans, and commoners. Their teachings reinforced the idea that had developed in Judaism, that if God is pleased with you, you will be blessed, and the opposite idea that if you were poor or sick, it was because God was punishing you. We see this philosophy displayed in the disciples as they ask Jesus, who sinned this man or his parents, when they encountered a man who was born blind in John chapter 9. Jesus response points away from direct correlation between the human condition and favor with God.

Looking at Jesus’ ministry we see it filled with caring for the poor, the outcast, the diseased, the possessed and the wandering masses in Galilee. We see the love of Jesus in Matthew 9

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds,

he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Jesus desire for the kingdom of God is to include all people, not just the wealthy, powerful, or pretty ones. He deeply cares for the flawed, the hurting and the downtrodden. In Luke 19:10, Jesus says, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” This is reflected in our Gospel reading today.

The disciples ask Jesus. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” On numerous occasions the disciples appeared to jockey for positions of authority in the new kingdom. Each time Jesus pointed to the great reversal. “The last will be first and the first last” (Matthew 20:16). Mrs. Zebedee even got involved in Matthew 20. Jesus responds saying, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first must be your slave.” (Matthew 20:26-27). The kingdom of heaven is not about entitlement but is about bringing the message of hope and salvation to all people and serving our neighbors.

In response to the question from the disciples, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus picks up a child and places him in the middle of the group. Many will tell you he uses a child as an example because they are innocent and vulnerable. While this may be true, children are still sinners. Anyone who has been around a two-year-old understands why they call that age the “terrible twos.” Many a time I have heard someone respond to the question “How old is he/she?” saying “He/she’s two.” And a sympathetic nod is conveyed to the harried parent.

Little children are not as innocent as we would like to think. In fact, they tend to be, like many adults, self-centered and self-absorbed. The world revolves around them. In Jesus’ day, children were not valued or catered to like they are today. Children were part of the family, but really did not have a voice. They were to do as the head of the household directed. As they grew, their duty was to work to support the family in any way they were told. This is what makes the parable of the Prodigal Son such a scandal in Jesus’ ministry. It was unheard of for a father to give into a son’s wishes and give him his inheritance so he could squander it. Children were to submit to their parents and to do as they were told.

So what message is Jesus’ use of a child intended to convey? How does this teaching inform the rest of the reading for today from Matthew 18? I believe Jesus

message is that the one who is in danger of falling into unbelief is the greatest. It is not one's position or perceived worth in the kingdom of heaven or the authority they may have in the church. Instead, Jesus calls attention to the least, the most dependent, the most vulnerable around us. It is not the one who is blessed with a strong faith but the weak that need to be attended to as if they were the most important in the kingdom. In fact, they are most important because as Jesus points out these are the ones who need attention paid to them to avoid losing their salvation. Using this metric for examining the text for today gives us a perspective on the love of God and the kingdom of heaven that is underdeveloped in many Christian communities.

Jesus said his ministry was to seek and to save the lost. A child, in this world is lost until someone engages them, teaches them, and trains them in life, the ways of the world, and most importantly, the ways of salvation through Jesus our Lord. Dependent on the love and care of others, small children cannot survive for long without intervention. This idea flows through the teaching of Jesus in Gospel reading. Today we will look at two of the examples, the parable of the lost sheep and Matthew 18:15-20.

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus turns worldly wisdom on its head and reflects the blessing for the poor in spirit. The shepherd who leads the sheep into safe pasture, realizes that one of the sheep has wandered away. Contrary to all tenets of shepherding, the shepherd leaves the flock, the ninety-nine, to seek out and restore the lost sheep to the fold. For the shepherd, his focus, is on the missing sheep. His greatest concern is for the safety and well-being of the lost lamb. The lengths the shepherd goes to for the purpose of finding the lost makes it the greatest in the world of the shepherd. The shepherd has not lost sight of his responsibility to the other 99 sheep. He has not abandoned them. They are no less great than the lost sheep, except for the fact that if the lost sheep is not found and returned, the entire community is diminished. The lost sheep is in danger of never reaching the goal the shepherd has for all the sheep, that being to enter into the pleasant pastures of the heavenly kingdom. The joy in finding the lost sheep reflects the heavenly joy that heaven is complete. All 100 sheep are saved.

A second illustration of Jesus' point of the weakest being the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is found near the end of our reading. When you hear of Matthew 18 what comes to mind? This portion of Scripture is most often cited in relation to disciplining an erring brother. This is often the place people turn

when matters of church discipline arise. This is called out in most congregational constitutions as “Church Discipline”. It is the means by which we correct an erring member and if they do not repent and seek restoration, it becomes the checklist for excommunicating them. More often than not, it truly becomes the defense used when someone seeks to avoid the consequences for their actions. It is also the defense applied on an impenitent person’s behalf when a well-meaning friend or family member seeks to prevent the church addressing sinful behavior.

The inclusion of the process of restoring a wayward brother and sister, included in this portion of Matthew’s Gospel, not to demonstrate discipline, but to provide an illustration of seeking, finding, and restoring the lost sheep of the fold.

We all know that if we are separated from food and water, we will become weaker and weaker. Our strength will ebb until we waste away to nothingness and die. That is how it is with life in Christ. If we are separated from God’s Word and from the fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ, our faith withers. We become weaker and weaker until our faith dies.

This separation from faith comes from the sin that clings to us. Try as hard as we can, we cannot help but sin. The world around us constantly tempts us to find other things to do, chasing after carnal pleasures rather than feed our faith. Summer brings temptations to wander from worship and place a higher priority on going to the coast, or boating on the lake, or hiking in the mountains. In the last 20 years, youth sports found ways to entice children and parents to place a higher priority on baseball, soccer, and other sports than to faithfully attend the Sunday services in the House of the Lord. Satan has lured many to abandon their faith and look inward and question who they are. The world embraces alternate lifestyles being intolerant of God’s plan for life and health, leading many to doubt their faith. The list could go on, and on, and on. These temptations draw people away from the faithful flock. These are the lost sheep. These are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Into this reality, God guides us to seek out the wayward brother or sister. Bring to them the Word of God that reflects His will for them. This not meant to be a time of conflict and anger, but a time of caring and showing the love of God the Father to a fellow heir of the kingdom. Seeking out the individual who is at risk for losing their salvation, the Christian reaches out in love seeking to reconcile the lost sheep to God and restore them to the congregation.

If the brother or sister does not see the error of their ways, additional efforts are made to save them from losing their salvation. Two or three seek out the wanderer, in love, attempting to show them the temptations that have lured them away from the fold and draw them back to the safety and security of the family of God.

If two or three are unsuccessful, the whole church seeks the restoration of the lost sheep through prayer and dialog with the individual(s). The entire worshipping body seeks the restoration of the lost sheep. Why? Because this lost sheep is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This lost sheep is in danger of falling outside the kingdom of heaven. This lost sheep needs the lifeline of the body of Christ to restore them to health and vitality in the Word of God. The lost sheep needs the shepherd, the individual brother in Christ and the whole church), to find them and bring them home.

We are all at risk of becoming that lost sheep. We may feel as though we will never fall away from the faith or from the church, but Satan is relentless in his efforts to lure us away. His temptations are well timed and often irresistible. When we sin, often we do not seek restoration through repentance and forgiveness. We seek to hide the sin. As we do, it festers and leads us to distance ourselves from friends and family. We are afraid that our failure will come to light and we will be embarrassed. So, we wander off, getting lost in the wilderness of sin, death, and the devil. Without help we will not survive. We need to be found and restored.

The point of Matthew 18:15-20 is not to drive sinners away, but to draw them closer. We are to see these children of God as the greatest in the kingdom and reach out to them in their pain, suffering and loss and guide them back to a humble faith in Christ. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 19:10, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." The lost sheep, the lost brother, the lost sister, and all who are lost in their sins.

The Son of Man, the Christ, the Great Good Shepherd, seeks all the wandering souls and desires them to be brought into the kingdom of God. This was the point of Jesus' death on the cross. Christ came to seek and save the lost. He came to seek and to save you and me. He lived, died, and rose from the dead so that sheep fallen humanity might be restored, broken people drawn into his kingdom, and lost sheep found and celebrated as they are returned to the flock.

Amen.