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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18A)

September 10, 2017

Text: Matthew 18:1–20

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

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” That seems like a rather odd question. Shouldn't it be self-evident that God is the greatest in heaven and earth? But the disciples ask the question anyway. They are thinking in terms of worldly power, honor, and prestige. Jesus had told them recently that He must die and rise again, and that His followers also must deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow Him. The disciples don't quite understand how God's kingdom works. Death and resurrection are the works and ways of the Lord. But the disciples are thinking in terms of worldly power and honor.

Jesus answers the question with the help of an object lesson. Look at 18:2–3, “And calling to him a child, he (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.’” Who's the greatest? Look at this child. Whoever becomes like this little one is the greatest. One can only wonder about the looks of confusion or shock on the disciples' faces.

We 21st century Americans tend to idealize children, especially babies and infants. They are innocent, helpless, and pure, or so we think. But there's no evidence that 1st centuries Jews thought such things about children. The Old Testament certainly doesn't teach that children have a special status of purity or holiness before God. To be sure, children are a heritage from the Lord and the fruit of the womb His reward (Psalm 127:3) but they are never portrayed as being role models for faith and devotion to God. According to Holy Scripture, children are sinners needing God's grace and forgiveness. It isn't without reason that in the OT, 8 day infant boys had to be circumcised. In the NT, Jesus calls the people of all nations, including their young children, to be baptized in God's holy name.

So what is it about children that make them such a great example? Jesus tells us.

Verse 4, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of

heaven.” Humility is the key to greatness in God’s kingdom; a humility born out of absolute dependence upon God for everything good, gracious, and eternal.

This child standing in the midst of Jesus and His disciples represents the very opposite of what the disciples were hoping to achieve. Children don’t have positions of power. They don’t make laws nor do they enforce them. Children are humble not because they consciously choose to be humble. They simply are humble because they depend upon others for everything.

Notice what Jesus says to His prideful, self-promoting disciples, “...unless you turn and become like children...” (vs. 3). Jesus says we turn, that is, we must repent, take up the cross of Jesus and follow Him. Regardless of our age, we must become, through repentance and faith in Jesus, children of our heavenly Father.

The humility exemplified in children is so foundational for God’s kingdom that Jesus says to receive a fellow Christian is to receive the Lord Jesus Himself. Vs. 5, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me...” The humble child is a symbol, representing every Christian. And to receive another Christian – in all their humility – is to receive none other than Jesus Himself, who brings His children to His heavenly Father.

It all sounds wonderful – and it is. But there’s an elephant in the room. The Lord Jesus refuses to ignore it and He deals with it. Sin; some of Jesus’ statements are hard, almost shocking. To hear Jesus’ teaching rightly, we must understand them through the lens of Calvary and Easter morning. God’s children of every age must confront the presence of sin within themselves most especially and in the lives of other Christians.

Vs. 6 is rather severe, “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 depths of the sea.” Every believer is under the watchful care of the Lord Jesus. To offend them, that is to cause them to doubt God’s love revealed in Christ or to cause them to fall from faith, is to offend the Lord Jesus Himself. For He is the One who died and rose again to save them. Jesus warns His Church that there will be a fearful reckoning for anyone who causes His children to sin.

Don’t play around with sin! It will destroy you, and possibly others too. It would be better to cut off the sinful hand or the wandering eye and enter into heaven maimed than to be whole yet cast in the fire of hell, says Jesus (vs. 7–9). To be sure, our Lord

is speaking in hyperbole. But we are to forsake and abandon sin. Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God says Paul (Rom. 6:11). In Jesus' eyes, there are no big sins and little sins. Everything that sets itself up against God, His works, and His ways, is sin. And it must be ruthlessly abandoned through daily repentance and faith.

And just in case we miss the point of being humble like a dependent child, Jesus reminds us that He is the One who seeks and saves the lost (vs. 11). Children can't save themselves from harm and danger. Christians can't save themselves from sin, death, and the devil either. Jesus must do that for us. And the cost to save us is enormous. The only thing greater than the price to save His lost people is God's love that gladly and willingly pays the price. The cross and resurrection of Jesus are the culmination of God's love for you and all people. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" says Romans 5:8.

Our Lord Himself followed this path of dependent humility. The cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter reveal that Jesus too humbled Himself. Our Lord lost everything on the cross; He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death. Our Lord's call to become children simply means to follow Him in the same path of death and resurrection. After His resurrection, Jesus was exalted to the highest heavens and given the name that is above all names. As we follow Jesus in humility, so we will follow Him in the exaltation of the glorious resurrection of the Last Day.

During these days between Christ's resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand and His glorious 2nd coming, we Christians walk in the humility of a dependent child. Sin will harass and plague the Church, the one place on earth where forgiveness and grace reign supreme. In vs. 15–20, Jesus describes how the Church deals with sin. What must be said up front is that sin is never ignored. It must be dealt with. Jesus didn't ignore it. He went to Calvary's cross to destroy it.

If a brother sins against you, says Jesus, you must go and tell him. There's no place for gossip here. If he repents, your brother is restored. And there is great rejoicing in heaven and earth. If he does not repent, then two or three witnesses must speak to him about his sin. Notice something here. It must be public in nature for it to proceed past the first step. It must be something that was actually witnessed by others.

If the brother repents after being admonished by two or three witnesses, then he is restored with great rejoicing. If he does not repent, then the entire Church must speak to him. The Church that Jesus establishes is willing to do the hard work of calling her members to repentance and is eager to forgive them.

This Church, that is absolutely dependent upon Jesus, is gifted with the binding and loosing keys of the kingdom of heaven, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (vs. 18). Through the Church’s ministry of preaching about sin and God’s answer to sin – contrition and faith in Jesus, we hear and experience by faith that our sins are forgiven, forever taken away. We learn that Christ Jesus took our judgment and punishment. We see that He suffered our hell. The Church, through her pastors, is commanded to proclaim the loosing of sin, the silencing of judgment, and the shutting of hell for those who repent and believe that Jesus is the Christ. Likewise, the Church, through her ordained pastors, is commanded by Jesus to proclaim that sins are bound, judgment is pronounced, and hell is destined for those who refuse to repent and confess that Jesus is Lord.

Vs. 19–20 is most important, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Jesus is among us when we gather in His name, even when only two or three are present. And when we gather together, sin is dealt with. Through God’s Word and Sacraments, it is forgiven. Sin was confessed at the beginning of this worship service. And forgiveness was pronounced in God’s holy name. Forgiveness is proclaimed even now through preaching. Your sins are forgiven because of Jesus. In the holy supper, Christ gives His body and blood to forgive our sins.

Forgiveness reigns supreme in Christ’s Church. Where there is forgiveness, there is Christ’s life, joy, salvation, and all the gifts of heaven. Will some reject it? Yes. But for everyone who walks before Jesus as a humble, dependent child, there is glorious forgiveness. He watches over His dear children with ever vigilant care and devotion.

Who is the greatest in God’s kingdom? Jesus is. He is the Father’s Son – THE Child – who is God’s kingdom. Dear children of God, stay next to Jesus in all humility and faith.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.