

14 S. after Pentecost 9/6/20
Matthew 18:1-20 18A

AT THAT TIME THE DISCIPLES CAME TO JESUS, SAYING, "WHO IS THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?" 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 HUMBLING HIMSELF LIKE THIS CHILD IS THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

How does that old saying go, "It's not what you know, it's who you know." That's most certainly what the disciples believed in our Gospel lesson this morning.

When Jesus and the Twelve reached Capernaum, some came to them and inquired about paying the temple tax. They asked Peter, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" Peter answered, "Yes," He does. When they went into a house, Jesus asked Peter, "From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" Peter correctly answered, "From others". Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free". Jesus goes on to say something like this, "When it comes to God, Peter, you and I and the rest of the boys, we are sons of the king. We are free. We don't have to pay the temple tax, but so that we don't offend people, we will pay it" (cf. Mt 17:24-27).

From that conversation, Peter and the boys in the band took away the notion, the idea, that they were sons of the king. They like that. That's a status if there ever was one. So, with the idea that they were sons of the king ringing around inside their heads, they go up to Jesus and ask, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 1). Jesus knows what they want to hear, and it goes like this: "You guys are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. You are sons of the king. Look what it is you've done

for the kingdom of heaven -- you've left home, you've left businesses, you've left everything to come, follow Me, and be My disciples. You've gone out and cast out demons and healed people. People look at you guys and say, 'They are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'. Ok, maybe not you Judas, but the rest of you guys, people will be asking for your autograph and taking selfies with you guys. The day will even come when they will name their congregations after you guys. You guys are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven". That's what they want to hear. That's what they thought they would hear.

But, there's a problem, isn't there? Jesus didn't say anything like that at all. He takes a small child and sets that child in the midst of them and says this, "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" (vv. 3-4).

A child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven! Come on, Jesus, you can't be serious about that. Yes, we know Scripture says, "Children are a heritage of the Lord" (Ps 127:3). We also know Scripture says, "Woe to the land whose king is a child" (Ecc 10:16). Children don't have the ability to know good and bad – that's why you have to teach them things like not to touch the hot stove burner and not to play in the street. They can't take care of themselves – that's why you have to feed and clothe them, and even put them to bed at night. They're completely and totally dependent on other people. So, when it comes to greatness in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus, it can't possibly be a little child.

So, if you want to talk about being great in the kingdom, talk about the disciples. These guys have left everything; they've taught for you,

preached for you, they've even given their lives for you, these guys are great.

We can't stop with just the Twelve. There are great people in heaven: Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the Virgin Mary. Then there's the angel with the everlasting Gospel to proclaim, Martin Luther, himself. He set us straight about being saved by faith alone. And the 1st president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther is in heaven. We probably would not even have the LCMS if were not for Dr. Walther. We can't stop there, because there are more great people in heaven, people like Mom and Dad, who brought us to the font of baptism and taught us the Christian faith. Not to brag, Jesus, but we've done a lot of great things for the kingdom of heaven, too. There are a lot of people in heaven who are super-great, and you have to agree with us in our assessment.

But, He doesn't. Which is why Jesus called a child to Himself, 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" (vv. 3-4). He is bound and determined that we see greatness in terms of the humility of a little child. We need to see greatness the way Jesus does. Greatness is not about achievement, what we have done, wealth and popularity. Greatness in the kingdom of heaven is defined in terms of humility, dependency, reliance upon God for everything.

And everything means everything. Turn and become like a child who relies on our Father in heaven for all things -- "clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have," including forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Jesus says, “unless you become like a little child, you will miss out on the kingdom of heaven”. So that won’t happen to you, God Himself takes a child and sets that child in the midst of us. You will find that child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. It’s the Lord Jesus Himself, in the flesh, there He is -- completely and totally dependent upon His Father in heaven, relying on the Father to care for Him. Which the Father does. He does it through His mother Mary and His guardian Joseph. They fed Him and clothed Him. They made sure He was protected when Herod got it into his head he was going to kill all the boys two and younger. As Jesus grows, they make sure He is under the Law, seeing to it that He gets circumcised, that He goes to Jerusalem for Passover and all the feasts.

As Jesus grows and becomes a man, He nevertheless is like a humble child. There He is out in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. What’s He doing? He’s in prayer to His Father; trusting His Father will protect Him and comfort Him.

Then, as He goes to the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing His life is coming to an end, what does He do? He prays, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Lk 22:42). It was the Father’s will that Jesus go to Jerusalem, that He suffer many things, be nailed to a cross, and, as He is extended upon that cross, He is again humbled like a child. What does He do? He relies on His Father, trusting His Father, “Into your hands I commit My spirit” (Lk 23:46). And Jesus dies as the atoning sacrifice for all your sins, so that by His death He takes away your delusions of grandeur and greatness, and all the rest of your sins as well. Jesus dies and He rises to deliver that forgiveness into your life.

And where did He deliver it? At the font of Holy Baptism, where you were brought as a little child -- a child needy; a child dependent; a child trusting; a child who receives the forgiveness, life, and salvation when you are given the gift of faith that trusts in Christ alone.

In that water and by that Word, you were made a child of God. He turned you into what He wants you to be. Children, who are humble, who are dependent on Him for all things. May that always be the case.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.