

Pentecost 15 9/6/26
Matthew 18:1-20 18A

“TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, UNLESS YOU TURN AND BECOME LIKE CHILDREN, YOU WILL NEVER ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.”

A group of distinguished and stately Englishmen, complete with umbrellas and bowler hats, happened upon a group of American university students playing frisbee in Hyde Park, in London, England. This being the 1960's, they had never seen a frisbee before, so they watched with great interest, for some time. Finally, one of them walked up to the Americans, and said, “Excuse me. I don’t mean to interrupt your game, but we cannot figure out who is **winning**.” It almost seems like is it just a part of our human nature that there has to be a winner and a loser.

Look at the disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. Remember Jesus’ words in last Sunday’s Gospel? He tells the Twelve that He is going to Jerusalem, to suffer and be killed and raised from the grave. He makes it quite clear His future is the cross. Then He says, “*If anyone would come after Me, let him deny and take up his cross and follow Me*” (16:24). What was their reaction? The disciples didn’t want to hear anything about crosses. Look at their words to the Savior, “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” (v. 1). They wanted to know: Who is going to **win**!

Did you notice how Jesus answers their question? With the example of a child. In the folly of our sin, the disciples, like you and like me in our sinful reasoning, did not see their sin and their inability to save themselves. Like children are helpless to care for themselves, we cannot earn God’s grace and favor. As someone must do everything for a child, Jesus must do everything for us.

Hear again the Savior's words, *"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). To which we ask that Lutheran question: What does this mean?

I have mentioned before, that from an historical point-of-view, we Americans have a romantic view of children; we tend to see them through rose-colored glasses. Why, what do we even call them? "Little angels; precious, little angels." May I be so bold to ask you a simple, direct, straightforward question? What does your little angel do when they have wet diapers and need changing? How about when they are hungry? How about when they wake up in the middle of the night? Do they think, "Oh no, mom and dad are busy, I mustn't bother them now. Why, it's three o'clock in the morning, I mustn't wake mom and dad at this hour." Have you ever seen two children try to play with the same toy? One child has it, and another wants it? What happens? Do you still want to try to convince me that they are little angels?

Children can do nothing for themselves. They are totally dependent on someone else for life. Children cannot feed themselves. Children cannot wash and dry their clothes and clothe themselves. Children cannot bathe and dry themselves. Children are totally helpless to help themselves. If a child is to live and survive, somebody else must do everything for them.

Saints of God, the lesson Jesus is teaching us in the example of a little child is, that just as children are helpless to do anything for themselves, we are helpless to do anything for ourselves in the kingdom of

God. We cannot earn God's grace nor favor. We cannot save ourselves by our works.

And your life shows it. The Lord your God says to you, “*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*” (Le 19:2). You’re not holy, without sin. You don’t gladly hear and learn God’s Word. You think of bringing your children to worship as a burden. We don’t honor, serve, and obey those in authority over us. We cheat on our homework and think nothing of it. The speed limit? Have you driven on a highway lately? No of course not, you would never end your neighbor’s life; you would go to jail for that. But you stay awfully angry with your neighbor, and wish harm and ruin on them, without giving it a second thought. Wives are to submit to their husbands, as the Church submits to Christ. How’s that working out for ya? Let me guess: Do way are you going to obey that Neanderthal. You don’t love and honor the spouse God has given you; you lust after that woman and think of how happy you would be with her. You hoard more and more for yourself, ignoring your neighbor, and then worry that you don’t have enough. And behind it all is a complete lack of trusting in God above all things, because in our selfish self-centeredness, we want things our way. Your sin shows that you are helpless as a child before God.

Just as someone must do everything for the child, so someone must do everything for us, if we wish to enter heaven. The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus made Himself least in the Kingdom of heaven to save us. The Bible says this of Jesus,

“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Ph 2:6-8).

Though He was “very God of very God,” Jesus humbled Himself to be born of a Virgin and take on a servant’s form in a real human body so that He could take on our sins and its wages of death. He was obedient – even to death on the cross. And because He died on that cross, we are forgiven. On the 3rd day, He did rise from the grave, to bring life and immortality to light for us. That means, My Friends, that we do win – we **win** in Jesus over sin, death, and hell itself. And it also means that today we live as the Conqueror we are in Christ Jesus.

III. “Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me... See that you do not despise one of these little ones,” Jesus says. Again, I ask you, Lutherans: What does this mean?

To help us answer that question, look at Paul’s words in our Epistle, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does not wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Ro 13:9-10)*. Baptized and living in Christ, and Christ in you, you are a little Christ. Just as Christ serves you, you, as a Little Christ, serve your neighbor in the vocations, the places, God has placed you.

That means that if you are a student, you do the assignment your teacher has given you to do. We do obey the governing authorities in all things that do not conflict with God’s Word, including paying our taxes and yes, driving the speed limit. So much as in us lies, we seek to live at peace with everyone, including that neighbor or family member who has more thorns than rose petals. Husbands do love their wives, as Christ has loved the Church and wives can obey their husbands, as the Church obeys Christ. We are content with what God has opened His hand to give us. In all things – all things – we love and trust in God, even when His ways and His will make absolutely no sense to us.

As God continues the work He began in us at our baptism, He forgives, strengthens, equips and encourages us to receive each and everyone that God brings into our life, as He has received us as His own child.

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