

Matthew 18:1-20

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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Greatness

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 18:4: Jesus said, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

A child stands in the midst of the disciples. He hasn't wandered in by accident: Jesus has put him there. He has placed him among the disciples as an object lesson to their question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

The answer should be obvious: Jesus is the greatest. But rather than simply say, "I am," the Lord stands a child in their midst. Instead of saying, "I am," Jesus begins by saying, "You're not." His words are different, though: He says, "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."

I'm all for kids, but I don't usually associate them with greatness. Little kids aren't known for doing great things. Their version of greatness usually includes great messes, great piles of laundry and epic meltdowns at the worst time. Every time I see a family with small children on a vacation, my observation is confirmed that the littlest one in the family requires the greatest amount of luggage. Little ones don't even notice: they simply accept the attention, take all the help and go about their lives in faith that there is more on the way.

That's Jesus' first point as He answers the disciples: greatness in the kingdom of heaven is not about doing great things. It's humbling yourself and trusting like a child. It's not asking the question, "What can I do to achieve great things and improve my place in the kingdom of heaven?" Like a child, it's humbly saying, "I'm not great at all. I'm a sinner; but I trust that God has made me a child for Jesus' sake, that He will provide for me and work all things for my good." If that sounds disappointingly easy, don't be fooled: it's not easy. It's a miracle of being reborn. One only has this childlike trust in God by the work of the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus sets that little one in the midst of the disciples, let it also be to you a reminder that God has placed His only-begotten child into the midst of mankind. He has humbled Himself and taken on the form of a servant. He goes about His ministry trusting in His Father to care for Him, even when it is His Father's will that He go to the cross and the grave because of your sin.

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The child is still standing there, so Jesus speaks more of little ones. He says, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, 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 depth of the sea." Did you catch it, by the way? Jesus says that little ones can believe. They can have faith. They do not go to heaven because they're innocent or too young to be held accountable for sin. They go to heaven because they believe in Jesus, because Jesus gives them faith in Holy Baptism; and because they're joined to Christ in baptism, to receive and care for such children is to receive and care for Jesus.

Remember, Jesus is still answering the question of greatness, and His answer continues to war against man's ideas of glory. You will note that history books are not full of stories of babysitters, preschool teachers or stay-at-home moms: in the eyes of the world, childcare is no great thing, but gets in the way of pursuing greatness. But in the kingdom of heaven, as greatness is found in humility, so it is found in service to others, most of all those who cannot take care of themselves. Such service to children is vital for them; and it is also an echo of the greatness of Jesus, who as Lord of all spends His time with His children, with sinners like you and me, feeding us with His Word and His Supper. Doesn't the Lord of heaven and earth have better things to do than care for us? He says no. What a blessing for you.

On the other hand, Jesus gives a grave warning against those who cause such little ones to sin: it would be better to drown in the depths of the sea than to cause a child of God to depart from the faith. This places a heavy responsibility upon parents: as the Lord calls upon them to feed and clothe them, he also calls upon them to care for their souls, to clothe them in Christ's righteousness and feed them His grace. The responsibility goes with this privilege: they're honored to be parents, God's instruments for their kids. If they don't show care for their kids' souls, the kids will believe that God doesn't, either.

Parents, God be with you as you seek to raise up godly children. Be attentive to what your children are learning, formally and informally. Know what is taught, know what the battles are, and work diligently at home to strengthen your children in faith and truth. Fill your home with devotions, with prayer and blessing, with Bible stories at supper or before bedtime. Even if you do everything right, you may still suffer the grief of watching a child go astray; but the probability of a godly grown-up child is far greater if you faithfully nourish their faith. Don't be overwhelmed, and don't give up: remember Jesus' promise to you that, "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world."

The danger of causing others to stumble, whatever their age, either by negligence or intent, is very real. In fact, Jesus says that if your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin, it is better to get rid of that member than keep it. If only it were so easy to identify and amputate the sinful part and be done! But it is not your hand or foot or eye that is sinful: *you* are sinful, through and through. You can't amputate your sin from your *self*. Thanks be to God that, in baptism, He drowned your old sinful nature and raised you up a new creation. He has clothed you with Christ, whose hands committed no sin, but accepted nails and a cross for you so that He might give you life. He calls you to daily repentance so that you might remain alive in that baptismal faith. Christ, who defeated sin so that it cannot enslave you, sets you free by His grace to be His servants.

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Jesus moves on to the parable of the lost sheep. A man loses one of a hundred, so he hunts and searches until he tracks it down; and then he rejoices more in the one found sheep than in the other 99. This is not a story of greatness according to the things of men: if you're great in the world's eyes, you don't go searching for the sheep that wandered. Instead, you enjoy the greatness of riches: you yawn at the loss of one measly little sheep, light your cigar with a hundred dollar bill and get back to being wealthy and unconcerned; or else, being great and all, you have authority to tell one of your servants to go find your sheep for you. Greatness in the world is concerned for itself. It doesn't take time to pursue the weak and the lost.

Jesus does. That's why He's standing there, teaching His disciples and little kids and everybody else. That's why He's about to start walking again, and keep walking until He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. That's why He's going to allow Himself to be nailed to a cross, so that you – the lost sheep – might be found. He has found you and made you His own: and because He has found you and given you forgiveness and faith, all of heaven rejoices in your repentance.

Jesus' death isn't great in the world's eyes. But in the kingdom of heaven, it is your salvation.

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Jesus has one more thing to say about greatness as He speaks of what to do when a brother sins against you. When you make enemies in the world, greatness requires you to make them small: to marginalize them, perhaps demonize them, ignore them and move on. Greatness comes at the expense of others. It is not so in the church: if your brother sins against you, you go and show him his fault. You don't do this so you can prove how right you were, but so that he might repent and be forgiven. Taking the time to call a brother to repentance is one of the most loving things you can do. Leaving him in unrepentant sin is not.

Going to your brother takes time and patience and love, and it will rob you of time and energy to do things you would rather be doing. But such labor is great in the kingdom of God; and it too is a reflection of what Christ has done for you. Crucifixion was not at the top of the list of things that Jesus would rather be doing; but for the joy of saving you set before Him, He endured the cross and scorned its shame. Now He sets you free to care for others.

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Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? The one who sins the least, forgives the most and serves all. That would be Jesus, of course. Take heart, my friends. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven has joined you to Himself. By His grace, you share in all good things with Him who has all authority.

Oh, rejoice! The One who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, demonstrates His greatness to you in great love, great life and great grace.

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