

Pastor Joe Polzin
 Matthew 18:1-20
 “The Greatest”

Year A – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 September 10, 2017

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

If someone were to ask you, who the greatest person in the world is, what would you say? For some of us, we might first think of a celebrity. For others, perhaps we think of a scientist, an artist, or an author, someone who’s contributed to our culture in some way. Still, others might look to a politician, a world leader, or a religious figure... I’m sure all of you immediately thought of a pastor, right? I imagine many of us might think the greatest person is someone who’s close to us, a family member or a friend. The truth is, there are many ways to consider who the greatest person in the world might be.

Today, Jesus tells us who the greatest person in the kingdom of heaven is. And instead of considering greatness from a human perspective, from a worldly standard, Jesus clues us in to what the standard used in his kingdom is like. And just as it did the disciples, his answer might surprise us.

We’re looking at Matthew chapter 18, the first five verses. The disciples, after being with Jesus for some time now, and seeing and hearing some incredible things, are nearing the city of Jerusalem with Jesus. And they might be anticipating some pretty great things to happen there. Things are starting to get exciting.

And as this is building up, the disciples can’t contain themselves, and they come to Jesus with a question, and they ask him, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Now Matthew doesn’t explicitly say this, but judging by Jesus’ response, as well as all the other times the disciples come to Jesus with a misunderstanding of how God’s kingdom works (cf. Matt. 16:22; 18:23; 20:20), it seems the disciples are asking the question with a misunderstanding. They are thinking only in terms of worldly greatness.

“Who’s the greatest?” they ask. “Who will get the most honor now, *and* in heaven? Which one of us disciples is the more honorable? It can’t be Peter, right? When we enter Jerusalem, how much greatness will be bestowed upon *me*?”

But as Jesus answers them, he turns everything they thought they knew on its head. He finds a nearby child, and physically places him or her right in front of the disciples, so there was no way they would miss his point. And he 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” (18:3-4).

This would have been just about the strangest answer Jesus could have given. In their day, no one would have looked upon children as an example of anything to model their lives after. People in their culture loved their children, to be sure, but children were not wise, they were not powerful, or logical, or self-sufficient. And in their day, you would model the *men and women* who were those things. Children were only considered useful in their *potential* to become these things one day.

Even in our culture today, although it’s a little bit different, think about our goal with children. We raise them until they’re old enough to go to school. We help them through school until they’re old enough to prepare for a job or college. They may advance into additional

training or studies to begin a career. All to the point where they become self-sufficient, independent, and on their own. Children grow up to become adults. One would never dream that a “*great person*” is an adult who becomes like a *little child*.

This had to have been what the disciples were thinking, as well. And Jesus flips everything on its head when he said that their model was to *be* like this child, to *become* like a child, in order to enter, and be great in, the kingdom of heaven. What is Jesus getting at here?

In their context especially, but even in ours today, a young child offers nothing of practical value to a family or to society. Their position in society was one of complete neediness and dependence. A child looks to their provider for everything they need, and so they receive. They are not cared for because of what they can *offer*. Children are cared for simply because they are *loved*.

Jesus says this is how it is to be with us and God. We do not “advance” in the kingdom of heaven by what we achieve. We don’t even enter the kingdom, enter the family of God, by our own merit. We are, as creatures created by a Creator, in a complete state of neediness and dependence. We have nothing except that which our Father in heaven has graciously given to us. And we receive.

Furthermore, we are sinful creatures, ones who by nature can’t help but strain and rebel against the God who loves us. But He doesn’t love us because of what we can offer Him. In fact, He loves us *in spite* of what we offer Him, our sin and our shame. And it’s the sinner who, like a child, recognizes his complete and utter dependence on God and the need for His forgiveness and love, it’s *that* sinner who will enter His kingdom, *and...* be considered the “greatest.”

By worldly standards, it’s the one who achieves the most who’s considered the greatest. But by God’s standards, it’s the one who recognizes they can achieve nothing, who recognizes they have great need for Him, who’s considered the greatest.

And then Jesus says, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (18:5). Who is “one such child”? Well, it’s children, but it also stands to reason that he’s talking about any disciple who has humbled himself like a child. Even more, Jesus is calling all of his disciples, all Christians, to receive and regard as the most important the fellow disciples who are the neediest, the most dependent, the most vulnerable, and the weakest.

Did you catch that? By first recognizing our own neediness and dependence upon God as His children, in God’s kingdom, we are to value and receive *as most valuable* the fellow Christian who might *seem* like they have the least value, because in God’s eyes *they* are the greatest. And when we receive someone in this manner, when we love and honor and cherish them in Christ’ name, then we also are receiving Christ himself.

Unfortunately, even in the Church, our sinful standards of worldly greatness often determine who *we* treat as great. It changes how we interact with people, and how we favor certain people. It’s all too tempting to give deferential treatment to the charismatic, the rich, the powerful, the persuasive, even when we’re talking about something as sacred as God’s own church. And why? Because this is the way our sinful world stacks and measures people.

But this isn’t how it works in God’s kingdom. At least it shouldn’t, because it’s not how it works with God. Jesus was telling his disciples that the most child-like is the greatest. It’s the person in our midst who’s most dependent, most troubled, most confused, most beaten down by the cares of this world, most attacked by sin and evil and Satan, the person in the most dire need. It’s the person who is well-aware that they are in need of God’s help, because without it, they would be nothing. *They* are the greatest.

So, what does that look like in our congregation? Who's the greatest? It's the widow who's still trying to gather herself even though the funeral was months ago, wondering if the ache in her heart will ever go away. It's the father whose family goes hungry some meals, not quite sure where their food will come from next. It's the woman who can't seem to hold a job, as she bounces from one community help resource to another. It's the man who struggles with addiction, and is mustering up the courage to admit he needs help.

It's the woman who can't think of anything except what the doctor is going to say at the next appointment. It's the family who's living from paycheck to paycheck, wondering when they'll finally get ahead of the debt. It's the single mom, trying to do right by teaching her kids about God, but who is only confronted with comments after the service about how noisy the kids were, as if she wasn't already well aware. It's the children themselves who are told they should know better. It's the new member who sits in the back, who's struggling to try to understand what it means to be a part of the church. These are the ones who may be considered the least in the eyes of the world, and, to *our* shame, these are the ones who, at times, are considered least in our eyes, as well.

But it was for the least, the needy and dependent children, that a Savior, who though, by his very nature, was the Almighty God, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, as a lowly child himself, and humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8). This Savior, Jesus, was despised by men, rejected by his own. And on the cross, he looked like, and was regarded as, the very least.

By the blood shed for us, our own haughty standards, which have us convinced we aren't quite as dependent and needy as Jesus makes us out to be, come crashing down. Because we see that we are *all* sinners in need of a Savior. We are *all* children, humbled by our sin, standing outside of the kingdom, looking in. And we are *all* in desperate need of God's gracious provision.

And when, in repentance for our sins, we turn to God, realizing that without Him, *we* are the very least, that in our sin we are so low down... there and then, we find our Savior, who has come to us. Our Savior who made the greatest sacrifice that could ever have been made, on our behalf. Our Savior who forgives us, strengthens us, and gives us the promise of eternal life. God's own Son, Jesus Christ, made himself to be nothing for us, so that we who are the least, could have everything.

Experiencing this, and realizing what makes someone truly great in the kingdom of heaven, it affects how we live, how we are to treat one another. We are to see people as God does, and receive, as Jesus says, such dependent believers, even the *most dependent*, who are to be considered the greatest in the kingdom. Because in so doing, we receive Christ himself.

And this is why, despite all that Mathew chapter 18 has to offer us—and there's a lot there—all the sermons we could have heard today, I chose to focus our attention today on the these first five verses. Because if we understand the concept of who truly is the greatest in the kingdom, the rest of what Jesus says in chapter 18 makes sense in light of caring for these fellow believers. Look at the Gospel reading one more time with me.

Starting in verse 6, so important are the greatest in the kingdom, that we never should be the ones to tempt or cause a fellow Christian to sin. Verse 7, we should take sin seriously, and not only prevent ourselves from tempting others, but make sure sin has no part of our lives, as well. Verse 10, we should never despise others for being needy or dependent, because so important are they, that it's their angels who always behold the face of the Father in heaven. Instead, our attitude toward fellow believers, who may stray into harmful things, should be like a

shepherd, verse 12, who goes after the one sheep who is straying to return it to the flock of 99. Which is exactly the process Jesus describes beginning in verse 15, how to lovingly approach the sin of another, perhaps even the weaker brother or sister, with the goal of winning them back, not condemning them. And, as we'll hear next week, when that weaker brother or sister in Christ sins against you, in verse 21, we forgive them not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Chapter 18 is all about how God's kingdom works, and how we are to care... for the greatest. But all of it is rooted in our own understanding that we, without Christ, are *all* needy children. It's God's who has provided everything for *us* in Jesus Christ. So, we, too seek to love and serve our neighbor, because they truly are the greatest. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.