

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 32:1-8; Romans 13:1-10

September 10, 2023 (written & preached by Kathy Lilley)

Matthew 18:1-20

Grace, Mercy, and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our gospel reading today is in four parts. It opens with the disciples asking Jesus, yet again, who will be greatest. After explaining to them the need to be like a little child, the reading continues with a warning about sin, and the perplexing words of Our Lord, to “cut off” the offending member of our bodies. Jesus continues with a brief parable about a person, who searches for a lost sheep. The final section concludes with what we should do if another sins against us and Jesus’ promise to be with us. There is probably enough material here for several sermons, so I am going to concentrate on the first, the parable in the middle, and last verse of the Gospel reading.

As our reading opens, the disciples come asking Jesus about being the greatest. Nothing new really. The disciples have not understood what Jesus has been trying to tell them about the Kingdom of God. This question comes after Jesus has already told His disciples twice about the suffering and death that awaits Him in Jerusalem, and after He has told them that following Him requires denying themselves and taking up the cross.

It seems that Jesus’ message has not truly penetrated the minds and hearts of the disciples. Perhaps they have heard the part about the kingdom of heaven drawing near, but they have not understood what kind of Kingdom it is because Isn’t still true of our world today - we hear many messages that focus on being the greatest - The greatest ball player. The greatest country singer. Mohammed Ali called himself “The Greatest.” And there is constant debate as to who it the greatest of all time in sports.

So the disciples want to be the greatest disciple, the greatest in Christ’s kingdom. How does Jesus answer them? He calls over a child, and says be like him. More precisely He says turn and become like a little child. Turning precedes the becoming. What kind of turning? It literally means “about face.” Jesus is saying - You disciples are heading in the wrong direction. Stop going that way. Stop thinking that way. In fact, unless you humble yourselves, you won’t even BE in the Kingdom.

The disciples, like the Pharisees, were seeking a position of importance, but they did not realize that being in the Kingdom of God means seeking a low estate. It is that low estate where we are not trying to build ourselves up, instead it is the state where God picks us up and uses us for His purpose and His glory. Jesus tells us that God want us to be humble and care for others. But as we all know, we get focused on ourselves and forget that we are God’s children who need to follow HIS will, not our own.

Here, the disciples are arguing who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. Isn't it interesting what the disciples ask here? They ask a question but they are coming at the issue from a very human perspective. They are looking at it from the world's perspective. Scripture shows us again and again that the twelve didn't always understand what Jesus was saying. They thought they did, but here is another example of Christ Jesus flipping the tables on them using a child to tell them who will be the greatest.

Look at what Jesus does. He does not go and pick up a child and bring the child to himself. He calls the child. When Jesus calls the child to come forward, he is both metaphorically and literally inviting a person from the margins of society to stand at the center of the community. It is important to remember that children in first-century Palestine had virtually no power, status, or control over their lives. They were vulnerable to disease and hunger. Many died before they reached adulthood. Yet, Jesus tells his disciples, the one who becomes humble like this child in their midst will be greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. Furthermore, He warns them, unless they change—literally, “turn around”—and become like children, they will not even be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

In our culture being humble typically implies not being boastful, and though one may have many accomplishments, we are taught to not call attention to them. But, the humility that Jesus demands is something else entirely. Like the child in the disciples' midst, those who are humble have few options and little power. They live at the mercy of other people's choices. They are the people whom Howard Thurman, in his classic book, Jesus and the Disinherited, described as having their backs against the wall, which is the very opposite of the status and power that the disciples crave.

Jesus places the most vulnerable and powerless members of the society at the very center of the Christian community. Welcoming them means welcoming Him. Mistreating them or causing them to sin will result in a harsh judgment for anyone harming these little ones or causing them to fall.

The Greek root from which we derive our English words “scandal” and “scandalize” appears repeatedly in verses 6-9. The English Standard Version translates it as “stumbling block” and “stumble” or “cause to stumble.” When Jesus says in verse 7, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come,” the word “bound to” does not mean that such occasions are destined by God, rather it means that human experience has taught us that these events are inevitable. Human beings simply treat one another in dreadful ways, taking advantage of the weak in order to benefit themselves. Nevertheless, Jesus warns, woe to those who use their power without care for the powerless! Echoing His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges his followers to take extreme measures, even harming themselves, if it will prevent them from harming those whom society considers the last and the least.

When Jesus calls the child, the child obediently listens and comes. He doesn't ask why. Doesn't ask, “What is it going to cost me?” “How is it going to impact my life?” “Is it going

to be a pain, or is it not going to be a pain?" "Will it interfere with my plans or not?" The child immediately obeys without question! And yet, don't we often respond with those questions when God asks something of us? We ask all those questions. We find excuses not to do what we know God wants us to do. We act childish and selfish, not doing His will. We all sin, but Jesus reminds us here - unless we turn and become like little children, we will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He says, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven."

Then Jesus follows with the short little parable about lost sheep here in the midst of the discussion of the community Christ is imagining for those who will follow Him. In the parable a person has a hundred sheep. It is important that the person is not labeled as a shepherd in the original Greek but is 'a certain person' having 100 sheep. The person is not merely the 'caretaker' of someone else's flock but they both own and are present with the flock. The Greek word *plano* that is used here has the primary meaning of being led astray or deceived. This is language unique but important to Matthew's narration of this parable, especially sandwiched between a discussion of those who 'scandalize' the little ones by their actions and the upcoming discussions on forgiveness and reconciliation. This lost sheep has not merely wandered off, but has actively been deceived or misled away from the remainder of the 99. Likewise the action of the owner of the flock is not merely leaving the ninety nine on the mountain, but the Greek *aphimi* has the connotation of abandoning and the act of leaving behind the majority of one's sheep to search for the lost one who might be found would not be a normal action for a person caring for a flock, but rather the action of an owner of the sheep. It demonstrates that the point of the parable is that the one rejoiced over in the kingdom of heaven is the little one who was lost and regained. It demonstrates the continuing concern for the little ones who may be 'scandalized' and lost to the community. In Matthew's Gospel the primary issue is the finding of one lost to the community. This parable reminds those who have power of their continual need to seek out those who are led astray and to welcome them home with forgiveness and rejoicing.

Matthew's placement of this parable within a discussion of relations between members in the church and the continual emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness, acknowledges the danger that a little one can be led astray by the actions of those inside or beyond the community, but the hope is always for restoration. The lost little one restored is the source of joy of the owner and the will of the heavenly Father.

How does our Father reconcile with us when we have sinned? How does he receive us back? He receives back the lost ones, the ones who know that they're lost, who know that they're childish. He seeks us in our childishness, in our petty grievances, in our family histories of grumblings, in our marriages and relationships. He seeks our brokenness. He seeks us in all the things of which we are embarrassed and of which we wish not to confess to Him. He seeks those who know that they're lost, but are fearful of what might be done to them when they return. Our Lord is very clear to us in the text how diligent He is in finding us in our grief, in our jealousy, in our anger, in our lack of

self-confidence, in our worries and anxieties. He finds us so that He can bring us back to the fold.

God continues to search for us as lost sheep. He will never stop searching for us. God invites us to be with Him every Sunday for confession, worship and to be fed at His table. It is here in this place that He keeps binding up our wounds and healing our brokenness. He does the same thing with us as He did with the twelve. He sends us out in our brokenness and childishness to bring other people into His fold. It is here in God's community that we call the church where people are healed and are reconciled with Him.

Christ's message to us as a Christian community could not be more fitting. We need to remember that we are all sinners and He offers a simple guide to help us handle our sin and its consequences. But far more importantly Jesus promises us "when two or more are gathered in my name" that He is present with us. He is not just up here with those of us in the chancel but He is here next to each and every one of us. Jesus tells us that we are bound together as the Body of Christ to serve a God with the humility of a child and ensure that no one should be lost. When we serve God in the name of Christ, we become agents of reconciliation to each other and to all of His people. We bring the message of His Kingdom and His promise of Eternal Life for His children. Let us each go forth in peace and share the Good News of God's Kingdom! Amen