

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 10, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 18:1-20

“Caring for the Greatest”

Nobody wants to be in need. People don't seek to be powerless. That's about as far from being great in the eyes of the world as you could get. Think about it. Look at a family whose home has been destroyed by one of the hurricanes or monsoons that have been tearing up the Caribbean, the Gulf Coast and Florida, or India and southern Asia. What power did they have in the face of such storms? Look at the homeless person who goes to a shelter to get away from an abusive relationship. They might need to start over from scratch in building a new life. None of these folks seem to be a great place, do they?

Look at the world around you and see if you can tell who is great. Now that football season has returned, you might look for greatness in the NFL: who makes the biggest salary, who has the best statistics? Or if you're not a football fan, you might consider greatness by looking at the medals on someone's uniform or checking out the size of their office and the view from their window. Or if you're not into such status symbols, you could consider the respect that someone carries in their profession, their community, their school. In the eyes of the world, greatness often comes from what you can do.

One day, Jesus' disciples come to their teacher with a question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” This is kind of a recurring theme with them. The disciples fundamentally misunderstand what Jesus has come to do – and what it looks like when he does it. They see greatness like we do from the world's perspective. It seems to make sense to them that the kingdom of heaven – God's reigning that Jesus is bringing into the world – would work in the same way. Your standing must have something to do with your ability, your worthiness. Jesus handles the situation far better than I would. He doesn't shake his head and put his face into his hands, wondering why these guys just haven't gotten it yet; instead, he makes this a “teachable moment” to correct their misunderstanding.

Jesus brings a little child before them. No one back then would have looked to this boy or girl as an example of greatness. Today, people might say that children are great examples of innocence or enthusiasm or trusting, but that's missing the point. They're describing what a child *could be*, not what they are. Back then, as now, a child is not normally the strongest, the fastest, the smartest, the wealthiest, the wisest, or the most powerful person around. Adults wouldn't look to children as role models for greatness. They're dependents, not figures to emulate. But that's Jesus' point.

The greatest in the kingdom of heaven are those in the most need of God's grace. They are the ones who are struggling or hurting or alone and in desperate need in the family of faith. When Jesus declares in his Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3), this is what he's talking about: people who are dependent on God's loving care. Jesus tells all his disciples – including you and me – to care for them.

God cares for everyone in need of His grace. He cares for the greatest by becoming the least in the eyes of the world. In the miracle of the Incarnation, God the Son steps down into humanity. He comes not as a prince but as a peasant. He sets aside his glory and lives with His creation in poverty, suffering and dying a painful, shameful death. That's how God cares you.

For Jesus' disciples, caring for the greatest in the kingdom of God starts with recognizing your place in it as a person redeemed by Christ. Become like the children of God that you are: repent of pride, acknowledge your abject need for God's grace, and look to Christ alone for your hope. You and I are only able to care for the greatest in the kingdom of heaven because of the gifts God has given – and truly, we are dependent on Him for everything!

When you hear the rest of what Jesus says in our reading from Matthew 18 today, understand that it's all in the context of caring for the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. We are to care for our brothers and sisters in the Church, certainly in the times that they need it most. Care for your fellow disciple who is the weakest, who is struggling the most, who is most in need of patience and nurture and forgiveness. Don't make them stumble (v6-10). Search after them if they wander (v12-14). Try to gain them back from sin (v15-20). If someone is wandering away or deeply entrenched in sin, they need what God is offering through you, even if they aren't seeking it. Remember that caring for the greatest won't usually be easy, and it probably won't be pleasant because of the brokenness that sin causes in our lives. Even so, it is your calling as a member of our family in faith. We ought to demonstrate watchful care and concern for one

another. To put in terms that we use from *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, get to know each other and be aware of what **good you can do**, especially when it is most needed. As Jesus tells us, you are indeed serving him when you receive the greatest in the kingdom of heaven in his name.

This weekend with “Kickoff Sunday,” we mark the beginning in a new year of our life of discipleship and learning together. A big part of all this is caring for the little ones among us as our Sunday School teachers and workers share the good news that God loves us little children of all ages. We’re commissioning all these people, along with the members of our new Church Council, in this weekend’s services. If you are serving in one of those roles, know that you are going to be caring for the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. We’ll also see the start of this fall’s new ESL (English as Secondary Language) program, another opportunity to serve our neighbors in Jesus’ name – more information on how you can participate there is in this weekend’s newsletter.

Looking outside our congregation to our larger family of faith and our country and world, large numbers of people are in need right out, particularly from the hurricanes that have dominated the news for the past few weeks. As Jesus’ disciples, we can and should provide material and financial support for those who are most in need right now, and in the months and years to come. As others have said, recuperating from these storms will be much more like a marathon than a sprint. In the Church, we need to pay special attention to caring for our brothers and sisters in Christ, for they are our family in faith. Members of sister congregations down south have lost homes or experienced significant damage, including church workers and pastors. If you’d like to know more about how you can support such recovery efforts, contact the church office or visit St. John’s website. This is love in action, giving from God’s generous grace to those most in need. Recalling the psalmist’s words today, surely in the rush of great waters (Psalm 32:6), God is still with His people.

Nobody wants to be in need. People don’t seek to be powerless. But we have a Savior who became the least to save those He sees as the greatest in God’s kingdom. So let us go and serve in His Name.

Amen.