

Matthew 18:1-20

14th Sunday after Pentecost (proper 18)

September 6, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ.

INI

They say there is no such thing as a stupid question. That's what we tell our children. But if you haven't figured it out in your own lives already, all we have to do is look to the disciples to figure out that isn't true. Here they are again in our reading today, acting like children, asking a stupid question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

You can almost hear the gears grinding in their heads. 8 chapters ago Jesus gave them power and authority to cast out evil spirits and to heal people. And now they're tallying it all up. Who did the most good? Who showed the most power? Jesus has taken some of them aside separately at times. Only three of them got a glimpse of Jesus' glory as He was speaking with Moses and Elijah in the previous chapter. Does this mean that they are the favorites? 2 chapters ago Jesus spoke a blessing to Simon Peter because of his confession of Jesus. But Simon was answering for all of them. Is he better, or is it one of the others? Is it the oldest and wisest? Is it one of us who has the greatest amount of scripture committed to memory? Which one, Jesus? Which one of us is your favorite? Which one of us should the others serve? Which one is the greatest?

The disciples are behaving like children. So, Jesus gives them an object lesson. And He chooses a literal little child. **"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."**

Right away after hearing or reading these verses, many people start thinking things like *'uh, the innocence of youth. That is what Jesus is teaching. He's pointing to a child because the child is so innocent.'* And when little children are sitting still in church wearing their Sunday best, they can look pretty innocent. But ask any parent if their children actually are innocent. No. We have to teach children to tell the truth because they are natural liars. We have to teach them to share because they are naturally selfish. And many a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or older sibling has seen an unhappy infant with murder in their eyes.

Even with all of that said, in our modern culture, we still hold our children as very dear to us. But in those days, to the disciples, children had little value yet. That came when they got older. Sure, ideally parents would have loved their children. But they couldn't contribute to the family yet. They were weak. They couldn't offer wisdom; couldn't even choose between good and evil yet. There was no Netflix to keep them occupied while you went to work on other things. They were a drain. They were needy. They had nothing to offer in return for the care they received. In short, a child was not something to emulate.

So why did Jesus use a child as an example for these childish disciples? What is so special about a child?

Well, once we have dispelled the notion that children are innocent and have some inherent good heavenly quality about them that gets lost with age, we need to address the other conclusion people often jump to. Many take "humbling yourself like a child" to mean to actively lower oneself, to be obedient to, and to serve others. Jesus does talk this way later. In chapter 20, Jesus talks about the great becoming servants. But here, Jesus is using *a mere child* as an example, not an able-bodied adult who is capable of serving others in a significant way. What can a child do for the kingdom? What can a child do for Jesus? That's just the point, isn't it?

Children have no capacity for earning the kingdom of God and not much for serving in it. Children are helpless, reliant upon others, dependent. You might remember the account in Luke 18 in which Jesus was with the children. **"Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them."** You know the rest.

“Let the children come to me,” Jesus says, **“And do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”** And notice something there. How did the children and infants get to Jesus? They didn’t come on their own. Someone had to bring them.

When it comes to the Kingdom of God and a right relationship with God, there is no room for human initiative, effort, self-seeking, self-promotion, self-justification, self-advocacy. In fact, all of that gets in the way, builds obstacles to grace, and misses the point entirely of how God wants to save us, God’s way of saving us...by doing it all for us helpless, dependent children through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

This teaching could be frightening, very frightening. We’re adults now. We often think that we’ve made it. We’ve done our time, gone through rites of passage, proved our worth in society. We’ve earned our independence. We can drive. We can have huge bowl of ice cream that is doubled in size by the mound of whipped cream on top for dinner if we want. We can stay up late if we want to. We may pay for it the next day, but we’re our own bosses. We can make that choice for ourselves. Even if still in the workforce with a boss of our own, we can be our own boss as we choose whether or not to keep working for that boss. That’s control. That’s power. We’re grown-ups now. And we’re supposed to become dependent?

But a rather valuable insight which I think applies to this reading was offered to me by Sallyann this past week. One of her sons is turning 59. She referred to him as a “kid.” I laughed and said, “well, he’s not much of a kid anymore.” And she replied, “well you know, he’ll always be a kid to me.”

And that is the same way it is with God the Father. As old as we get, as wise as we get, as successful as we get, we will always be His children—totally dependent upon Him whether we realize it or not. Even those who are ignorant of their utter dependence and need of His mercy still are equally needy and dependent children.

Jesus’ call for His disciples to humble themselves and become like children isn’t actually a call for us to outwardly do anything. That comes later in the verses describing how the children of the Kingdom act toward other children of the Kingdom. But first we must realize that we are mere children, and, being children, are totally dependent upon our Father. If our Heavenly Father were not gracious and good and merciful and abounding in steadfast love, this would be a terrible thing because there is nothing that we dependent children can do. We have proven ourselves obstinate and foolish and unrighteous...all while we *think* ourselves obedient and wise and worthy. In short, we are childish all the time. But fortunately for you and me, our Father *is* good and gracious and merciful and loves all of His children. And He did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all. (Romans 8:32)

The Apostle John tells us, **“To all who did receive [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”** John 1:12

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, children of the Heavenly Father, how can you know of the Father’s love and continued care for you? How can you be sure? Through His love for us shown through His Son. We learn about it in church. We share it in our homes. We sing it in eloquent hymns passed down through the centuries, and even in the simplest of children’s songs.

1 Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong.	2 Jesus loves me! He who died Heaven’s gates to open wide, He has washed away my sin, Lets His little child come in.
Yes, Jesus loves you!	
Yes, Jesus loves you!	
Yes, Jesus loves you!	

The Bible, the Church throughout the world, your pastor, & Jesus Himself tells you so. Amen.