

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus covered a lot of ground in our Gospel today. He dealt with the disciples' question about "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" The question wasn't so innocent. They weren't just being inquisitive. They argued over being the greatest (Mark 9:33-37; Luke 22:24-30).

Jesus warned about damaging the faith of children — yes, He teaches that little children can and do believe. And He taught us about the seriousness of our own sins.

Jesus told of protecting angels; this text is often assigned for the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels, but since we've read it today, we'll use the alternate Gospel a couple weeks hence. And then He told a little parable of a sheep that goes astray and a man that seeks after it.

Jesus gave instructions on what is often called "church discipline." He clarified who could wield the binding and loosing keys, lest someone get the idea that only Peter was authorized to use them. He promised to be present when His disciples would gather in His name.

All of this in one Gospel lesson ... is there any relation among these? Is there a golden thread that weaves these all together. Indeed, it shows itself in the illustration of a child.

The disciples were using a misguided measure of greatness. When they asked Jesus their question, they no doubt were thinking in terms of worldly greatness. Greatness in the world is about power; it's about exercising authority over others, and lording it over them (Matt. 20:25). It's an attitude of ruling rather than serving, and that often implies the use of force and fear. We know the dangers of such power. It corrupts, says Lord Acton.

Greatness in the world today is often defined by celebrity or athleticism, wealth and influence (Luke 1:51-53). Social media has become an avenue for those who seek such fame and influence, spawning a whole new industry: social media influencers. Some of them, with followers numbering in the millions, can even get audiences with those in the halls of power in our government.

But none of these is greatness in the kingdom of heaven, and these are not how Jesus defines greatness in the kingdom. For Jesus, greatness is found in humility and neediness (Jeffrey Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11:2–20:34*, 890) — and later servanthood in the manner of Christ, for "*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Matt. 20:28).

Jesus illustrates this distinction using the example of a little child. You've got to "*turn and become like children*," He said, to be great in the kingdom of heaven. "*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*"

What is it about a child that makes him great? They wield no power. Apart from the guidance of adults, they are often cruel. They often make poor decisions. They can't care for themselves. They're physically weak. They may show promise, but in their status as a child, there is nothing great about them to our way of thinking, except that Jesus says they are — great in their dependence.

Thus, accepting this illustration, the disciples would have understood that to turn and become like a child and to humble oneself like a child before God is to admit that we are not admirable, that our thinking is too often not guided by God's reasonable and enduring word, that we are weak, sick with sin, easily swayed by the influence of ungodly people, that we are dependent on God for our survival, for our good.

It makes me think of St. Paul who could boast of his status: "*If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless*" (Phil 3:4-6). And yet, he didn't boast. Instead, he said, "*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness*" (2 Cor. 11:30). And he recounted how the Lord said to him, Paul, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" And Paul continued: "*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong*" (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Strength in weakness; greatness in humility and neediness.

Humbly acknowledging our own neediness before God, surely should manifest itself in how we treat others. Was there any — tax collector? sinner? Gentile? adult? child? — whom Jesus did not receive? Is there any for whom Jesus did not die and rise again. Is there any by reason of status that Jesus excludes from the kingdom? No, as Peter reminds us: "*God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*" (Acts 10:34-35).

Indeed, you are acceptable to him, crippled and maimed, weak and needy, as you turn and come to Him in humble repentance and faith. Jesus wants you, not as the ninety-nine but as the one. We don't hear it in this text, but it echoes in our ears: "*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*" (Luke 15:7). After all, those ninety-nine are deluded. As Isaiah proclaims: "*All we like sheep have gone*

*astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way”* (Isa. 53:6), but *“the Son of Man came to save the lost”* (Matt. 18:11), and He did it by becoming a little lamb Himself — weak and needy, though this one blameless — sacrificed for us bearing the sins of the world: *“the LORD ... laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (Isa. 53:6).

Jesus instructs us about “church discipline” as we say, but it’s really about Jesus through His church seeking out the one who has gone astray. Childlike humility and neediness are in view here, too, by all, remembering that we are all sheep that love to wander, and remembering that many of our own faults are hidden from us. We do not discern our own errors (Ps. 19:12).

A person’s intent is not the issue. I would hope that no Christian chooses to sin. They may be called involuntary sins, but they’re still sins. Humbly repent!

Ignorance is not the issue. That a person didn’t know that their words or actions were against God’s law doesn’t matter. They’re still sins. Humbly repent!

A sinner’s memory is not the issue. Whether a person remembers doing the deed or not — perhaps you spoke a careless word that hurt someone that you don’t recall — it doesn’t matter. Acknowledge it; humbly repent!

That a person is put into a no win situation isn’t the issue. As Christians we are sometimes put in positions of choosing the lesser of two evils. Acknowledge the sin — your choosing it doesn’t make it any less evil; then humbly repent of it, trusting in the mercy of Christ. As Luther said: “Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. ... by the riches of God’s glory we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. No sin will separate us from the Lamb, .... Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small?” (*Luther’s Works*, 48:282).

Yes, we pray that confronted with our sins, we would, as the needy children that we are, humbly repent of our sins and be restored to one another and to Christ. Which, finally, is why you are here, two or three gathered in the name of Jesus, that humbly confessing your sins, you may also hear and believe that they are loosed here on earth and also in heaven, for this is what we are promised by Jesus.

We’ve covered a lot of ground here today, as Jesus did with the disciples, but the central point of Jesus’ discourse here is to exhort us to acknowledge our weakness, our neediness, our dependence, and to encourage our humility. May we boast not in ourselves, but in Christ. May we trust in Him, in His cross and resurrection, in His forgiveness, for in Christ, when we are weak, then we are strong; when we are lowly, then we are great.

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