

Pentecost 14 / September 6, 2020

Matthew 18:3-4

“Truly, I say to you, unless you 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.”

“Greatness”

How do you define greatness? Greatness like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. In the world, greatness is associated with exceptional abilities. Wayne Gretzky was such a skilled hockey player that he is commonly referred to simply as “The Great One.” Greatness is associated with social and political accomplishment. Abraham Lincoln played such a pivotal role in the abolition of slavery in the United States of America that he is called “The Great Emancipator.” Warren Buffet is a giant in the business world. His greatness is a bench mark for other entrepreneurs to measure themselves against. Whether its in the world of sports, politics or business, in the world greatness is associated with exceptional abilities and accomplishments.

I wonder what the disciples thought Jesus would say when they asked Him, “*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*” There were many great people in the kingdom of heaven whom Jesus could have named. Any one of the Patriarchs. Most notably Abraham, since he was the one through whom God got the kingdom started in the world. He could have picked His own mother, since she among all woman was chosen to be the mother of the Son of God. He had recently referred to His cousin John the Baptist in similar terms. When He heard of John’s death, He commented that “*no greater prophet had arisen,*” but then significantly He concluded, “*but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*” Clearly, Jesus had a different take on greatness.

There is a good chance the disciples asked this question, hoping Jesus would choose one of them as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They argued amongst themselves as to who was the greatest. Jesus seemed to have three favourites; Peter, James and John. He had just taken them to the mountain where He revealed His glory in blinding light! Who was the greatest? How surprised do you think they were when Jesus called a child to stand in their midst and said, “*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*” In the world, greatness is proclaimed with loud fanfare. If others don’t blow your horn, you do it yourself. But Jesus identifies greatness with humility. And not the humility of someone who simply lacks self-esteem. He means the humility of faith that recognizes God as our loving Father and we as His children; dearly loved and dependant upon His grace. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He comes to us that through faith in Him we would receive the grace of forgiveness, the divine adoption of holy baptism and become children of God. There is nothing greater than being children of God!

In the world, children are often valued for their potential. We need children so that twenty years from now, we will have workers to replace adults who will move into retirement. The Canada Pension Plan and other senior benefits will only be sustainable, if there is a large enough work force to maintain the economy. Children are the future of ours and every society. A society without children has no future. But having become adults, no one would think of returning to childhood, if such a thing were possible. Would you like to become a child again? If you are a child, do you want to remain a child forever? Of course not, you want to get a car, get a job, move out of your parent’s house, get your own life. Even St. Paul spoke of childhood as something we move beyond. In 1 Corinthians he said, “*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I give up the ways of a child.*”

What’s so great about being a child then and why did Jesus use a child as an example of greatness? The greatness of the child was not his potential, or her developmental state at that point in time. The greatness of the child was her or his humble faith in Jesus. St. Paul grew from childhood to adult hood and left the ways of a child behind, but he remained a child of God. His faith deepened as he grew in wisdom and understanding, but he retained the humility of faith and in this, he always remained a child of God. It’s ironic that while the disciples asked Jesus, who was the greatest and argued amongst themselves as to which one of them was the greatest, that a Pharisee out did them all in terms of accomplishments in the kingdom of God. There was no greater apostle than St. Paul, but as Jesus said about John, whoever is least in the kingdom of

heaven is greater than him. Greatness is not found in our potential, abilities or determined by our accomplishments. Greatness is the humility of faith, which receives God's grace and walks humbly at Jesus' side. We become children of God through faith in Jesus as Saviour! We remain God's children by abiding in Christ as our Saviour.

In human terms, childhood is a developmental stage we process through on the way to physical, emotional and spiritual maturity. We are always our parent's children, but we don't stay in childhood forever. There were a lot of good things about being seven years old, but my parents didn't want me to stay seven forever. Grade four may have been the best two years of my life, but my teachers said enough was enough and sent me on to grade five. However old the child in our gospel may have been, Jesus wasn't celebrating her or his developmental stage. He was emphasizing his or her faith. Jesus didn't want the child to remain at the same stage of spiritual development. He wanted the child's faith to grow, mature and deepen. He wanted that child to grow in knowledge of the Lord through the study of scripture. He wanted that child to mature in her or his spirituality, to know more fully and believe more deeply that God is our loving Father. No matter how old that child got to be, Jesus wanted that child to remain a child of God through faith in Him!

Jesus wants the same for us. He wants our faith to deepen through our knowledge of the scriptures. Paul wrote to his spiritual child Timothy, urging him to continue in the study of the scriptures saying, they "*are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*" He wants us to grow in wisdom, by putting our knowledge gained through the scriptures into practice, in the living of our lives. Wisdom is putting the knowledge we gain through God's word into practice in our daily lives. The Psalmist sang, "*Your word O Lord is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*" He wants our faith to deepen through the nourishment of Holy Communion and by the refreshment given through the waters of baptism. He wants our faith to grow in strength, by being exercised daily through prayer, by living humbly with fellow believers and by offering others the service of our love, as the expression of His love. No matter how old we get to be, Jesus wants us to be children of God. We remain children of God, by abiding in faith in Him as our loving Saviour!

How do you become a child? Well you have to be conceived by parents and born into the world. How do we become children of God? Again, we have to be conceived by parents and born into the world. Then the Holy Spirit must plant the seed of faith in our hearts through the word and give it life through the gospel of grace in Christ Jesus. More than intellectual assent or understanding, faith is the attitude of the human spirit in relationship to God. Faith is the gift and work of God in our spirits, no matter what our age. The Psalmist sang, "*You made me trust you even at my mother's breast.*" In Isaiah 46 God said, "*Even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and I will save!*" Isn't that great? That's greatest thing you can know. That's what makes faith great. Faith is great, because it looks to God for every blessing in time and for eternity; especially for the blessings of grace, forgiveness and life in Christ Jesus.

Isn't it great to be a child of God in Christ Jesus? It sure is great! In fact, there is nothing greater! In his first letter St. John said, "*Behold, what love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are.*" Young or old, great or small in our eyes or in the eyes of the world, we are all great in the eyes of God, because He loves us. He gave Jesus to die for our sins, so we would have forgiveness. He sent Jesus so that we who were lost through sin, would be found in forgiveness and receive the divine adoption as children, through baptism into His death and resurrection. There is nothing more powerful than the love of God in Christ Jesus. Whether we are young or old, or somewhere in between, there is nothing greater than being a child of God through faith in Jesus. God continue to bless us with His love in Christ Jesus and keep us in His grace to life everlasting. In Jesus' Name. Amen