

Pentecost 15/ September 6, 2026

Matthew 18:3-4

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"

The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

The disciples spent a fair amount of time discussing amongst themselves who was the greatest. Two brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee, got their mother to request from Jesus what they perceived the most important positions in His kingdom, one on the right and one on the left. Once they argued with each other in private as to which of them was the greatest and were embarrassed when Jesus found them out. In our gospel they ask Jesus to settle the argument saying "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" In itself it is an interesting question. There are many candidates for such an honour. Moses and Elijah would be forerunners. After all they were the two selected from the Old Testament saints to stand with Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration when He revealed His divine glory. On the other hand, Jesus gave highest praise to His cousin John, saying, *"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."* Then He added, *"Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than He."* Clearly Jesus did not think of greatness in the same way as the disciples.

Instead of singling out any one person, Jesus answered by calling a child and placing him in their midst and saying, *"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* The world equates greatness with power, beauty, skill, wisdom, wealth. Jesus equates greatness with humility, self-deprecation, service and most importantly, faith. Moses and Elijah are among the greatest Old Testament saints, because of their visibility and the type of service they rendered. Moses is remembered as the one through whom God made covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and through whom God gave Israel His Holy Law. Elijah is remembered, because of His message, calling Israel to repent from the worship of idols and to return to the Lord. He was gloriously taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. But the most important thing about them, about John the Baptist and every saint is their faith. Faith is what makes people great in the kingdom of heaven, because it is through faith in God and His promises, fulfilled in Christ, that we enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whether we are ranked high or low in terms

of human greatness, there is nothing greater than being even the very least in the Kingdom of heaven.

There is nothing greater than being counted as a member of the Kingdom of heaven. It's so important that in our gospel Jesus says it would be better if we went through life crippled and maimed rather than being cast out of the Kingdom of heaven. We enter into the kingdom of heaven through faith in God's promises; spoken in His word, expressed in their fullness in Christ, crucified for our sins and raised for our salvation. The kingdom of heaven is God's righteous reign in the hearts of believers, founded upon the forgiveness of sin, earned by Jesus through His sinless life and sacrificial death, sealed in the water of baptism. Membership in the kingdom of heaven comes through forgiveness. Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven is exercised in forgiveness, towards others, especially towards fellow members of the heavenly kingdom. Forgiveness expressed to one another is so important that Jesus says in our gospel, *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault..."* A few verses beyond our gospel, Peter asks Jesus often must he forgive his brother, *"seven times?"* Jesus says, *"seventy times seven."* Our obligation to forgive is as great as our need to be forgiven.

There is nothing more important than forgiveness. It is what brings us into the kingdom of heaven and the means by which we express our heavenly citizenship. God desires that all people would experience His forgiveness. God reaches out to all people with the gospel of repentance and forgiveness through faith in Jesus, through the voice of the church, the body of believers. Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep to emphasize the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and over the recovery of one sheep that has gone astray. God gave Jesus to seek and to save the lost, the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He gives the church to seek and to save the lost sheep of the human household with the gospel of salvation and the call to faith in Jesus. His desire is that through the proclamation of the gospel we would cast all personal pride aside, see our sins, confess our sinfulness and put our faith in Jesus as our God and only Saviour from sin, death, the devil and hell. God values nothing more highly than faith and desires nothing more than that we would come to Him through faith in Christ and walk with Him all our days in the humility of faith. There is nothing greater in the kingdom of heaven than faith. There is nothing God exalts more highly or rewards more richly than faith in His promises, expressed fully and for all people in Christ Jesus. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one who believes in Jesus as his or her Saviour. There is nothing more important than faith in Jesus.

Jesus gave children in general and the child in our gospel in particular, as examples of faith. Faith is a relationship with God based on trust. Trust is not first or foremost a matter of understanding. Trust is first and most importantly the response of the human spirit to the Spirit of God. In Psalm 22 the Psalmist confessed, *"You are He who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts."* What could a nursing infant know about trust? Enough that Jesus says in our gospel, *"Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* We enter the kingdom of heaven through faith, by which our spirits respond to the Spirit of God working in our hearts through the word, the water, the bread and the wine. Faith doesn't ask how these things can be, as did Nicodemus when Jesus told him he must be born again. Faith simply receives the promises of God for the sake of Jesus as the Holy Spirit brings them to us in the word, the water, the bread and the wine. Faith doesn't question the promises of God or His power to work in our hearts. Faith receives with joy the love of God in His promise of forgiveness and life in Christ Jesus.

Faith exemplified in the trust of children is so important, so precious a gift that Jesus speaks the most severe woe against anyone and everything that would harm faith in God's children, saying, *"It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."* Jesus isn't talking just about the faith of 'children', but about the faith of all the children of God, whether we are new born or aged and on our death bed. Faith is such a precious gift that we should shudder at the thought of doing anything to harm our own faith through sin, or the faith of any other believer by sinning against them or in any way causing them to sin. Paul said he would give up his liberty in Christ in terms of food and drink, rather than cause a fellow believer to stumble and lose their faith in Christ Jesus. In the chapter after our gospel, the disciples who argued which of them was the greatest, who vied to be the most important in the kingdom of heaven and who sought the most important places on the basis of their works, turned the children away from Jesus. Jesus said, *"Do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."* The kingdom of heaven is God's righteous reign in the human heart through faith in Jesus. There is nothing greater than faith in Jesus. There is no one greater in the kingdom of heaven than those who have faith in Jesus. Jesus calls, *"Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."* Jesus calls us to Himself through the gospel; in the word, in the water, in the bread and the wine, so that we would have faith in Him and life eternal in the kingdom of heaven.

How powerful is the faith of a child? The faith of God's children is so powerful that through it we have access to Him at all times and in every place. The faith of God's children is so powerful that Jesus is present in the heart of every believer, even to the end of the age. The faith of God's children is so powerful that when as few as two or three of His children are gathered together in Jesus' Name, He is with there with us in a special and extraordinary way. The faith of God's children is so valuable that we would be better off losing every part of our bodies and even life itself, rather than stumble and fall from faith. Faith is great and glorious and of infinite value, because it is the gift of God, given by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Faith is great and glorious, because through faith we become the children of God and are made heirs of eternal life. God bless us always with faith in Jesus, the faith of children, believing His promises, trusting His love for the sake of Jesus. To that end, may His holy angels watch over us and His Spirit preserve our faith until faith passes into sight in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In His Name. Amen.