

“Who is the Greatest?”

Matthew 18:1-20

Throughout July and August, our Gospel readings were from Matthew chapters 13 through 16. It was nice to go through that whole section, and we really didn't skip over too much. Matthew has a style of writing where he organizes the events of Christ's life in such a way that various sections of the book have a front end and a back end which mirror each other, and at the center is the main point on which he is focusing. This type of writing is called a “chiasm” – named for the Greek letter Chi, which looks like an X.

In fact, if you look at the front of the altar, you see the XP symbol. What looks like a P is the Greek R. In Greek, XP are the first two letters of Christ.

With today's Gospel reading, Matthew begins a new Chiasm with the disciples having a debate about “who is the greatest?” This section of Matthew goes all the way up to the end of chapter 20 and will end with the mother of James and John asking Jesus that he allow one of them to sit on His right and one on His left in His kingdom. She wants her sons to be placed in positions of greatness above everybody else.

Everything that goes on in between can be seen as a larger discussion of what true greatness according to the Kingdom is. And in this section of Matthew, repentance and forgiveness are major themes.

And at the center of this, where the X meets in this chiasm, we find parents bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus, the disciples telling the parents to keep their children away from Jesus, and Jesus says, “Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for to such belong the kingdom of heaven” [Mt. 19:14].

We turn to our text for today, and what do we see? The disciples are all concerned about what it takes to achieve greatness. And they want to know “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And Jesus show them.

He calls forth a child and put him in the middle of them. This word for child “paidon” can be a toddler up to not quite a teenager. And He says, “Amen, truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And there is not “greatness” outside of the kingdom of heaven.

This little phrase, “unless you turn and become like children” is a prime example of God’s wisdom having the New Testament written in Greek and not English. This is a passive verb. This is not something you do; this is something that is acted upon you. “Unless you are turned” and become like children. This is not you making yourself to be like a little child. This is God, the Holy Spirit, doing His work in you so that you see that you are like a little child.

The same is true of the next thing Jesus says, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” When Jesus speaks of you being humbled like this child, He is not telling you

that your job is to be humble – to be this sweet little nice person who never does anything wrong.

The image of the sweet little pure innocent child is really a false image put forth in modern society. After all, they are sinners just as much as any adult. I have not found one yet that was completely sweet, pure, and innocent. In our culture, for whatever reason, beginning a little over 100 years ago, we have placed children on this pedestal of innocence – the concept of the “innocent child.”

Parents in the ancient world certainly loved their children, but even the word for child “paidon” had a very different understanding. This word can even be used for an adult who is helpless, who is handicapped in some way so that he or she is unable to feed, or clothe, or care for themselves.

When Jesus says we are to be humbled like a child, this is not to be meek and gentle and innocent with big eyes that tear up and melt the hearts of everyone around them. Jesus says you need to be turned, be converted, be changed to someone who believes that you are completely helpless – that you can do nothing to save yourself.

You are God’s child. He is your Father. Remember though, that you are like His infant children. It is wrong to imagine, as an adult, your relationship with your heavenly Father is like your relationship with your earthly father.

As I have said before, I respect my earthly father. I will listen to his advice. I will even follow his advice, if I want to. But I don’t need him to

survive anymore. I am happy to have him around when he is around, but I don't need him around every day.

To treat God this way is a grave mistake that is made far too often. You and I are like small children to Him. Without His continual presence, we would not survive. Jesus is telling the disciples, in all things you are entirely reliant on God, so why are you arguing about who is the greatest? If you want to have a godly argument, argue about who is the weakest. However, if you win that argument, if you take any pride in winning, you just lost.

It is a completely different way of thinking. Yet, this is exactly how God would have us approach Him and one another. Jesus doesn't give His disciples a bunch of rules to follow so that you will change your outward behavior and therefore look like good Christians. He challenges them, and He challenges each of us to be turned, to think differently than we did before. Not simply to act differently – to think differently. You are not the same person you were before you heard the Gospel. If there has been no change, if you do not think differently, then you have not “heard” the Gospel.

Jesus says, “Understand that you are like children. You have no strength or ability to save your own life. Repent, forgive, receive the kingdom of God like a little child. For the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Amen.