

Mathew 18:1-4
“Who is the greatest?”
14th Sunday af. Pentecost

10 September 2017
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Vicar Luke Scheele

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? That’s the question of the day. The question the disciples posed to Jesus. And the question that we will reflect on.

[False Answer #1]

To get started, we should probably look again at our scripture readings to find the answer. Anytime Christians begin a period of reflection and devotion it is always best to start with the rule and norm of our faith, the Bible.

Looking now at our Gospel reading, it says, “**Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**” (Mt 18:4).

Well... there you go. Question answered. Sermon done. Children are the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Look at all of the Children here today. This is Rally Weekend and the children are being introduced to a new year of Sunday School and Midweek classes. The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven are being given praise and honor. They are being guided by the many teachers and staff to help them grow in faith.

By this kickoff celebration, our church is demonstrating how important these children are. We are following the guidance of scripture and making the last first and the first last.

That’s ultimately what children are. They are the last. The last ones to join the family. The last ones in decision making. The last ones in responsibility. The last ones in so much.

By putting the children first we are honoring them. We are teaching them that God’s Word is important. That we should celebrate. We should celebrate the chance to learn about Him and rejoice that God has blessed us with this new year full of opportunities.

Opportunities to learn and to grow. Opportunities to return to the word of God.

Returning now, to the Word of God we read again, “**Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**” (Mt 18:4).

At closer inspection it doesn't actually say the child is humble. Instead, it talks about a particular type of humility. A type of humility that can be shown by a child's lot in life.

Now to be specific, Jesus was talking about a young child. A child below the age of puberty and even possibly a Toddler who is just old enough to stand.

A child who is dependent on his parents. A child who can't even feed themselves at first. A child who must return time and time again to his parents for everything.

My own children demonstrate on multiple occasions every day this inherent humility. In fact, they return to my wife, Hope, and I so many times that, I kind of wish my children weren't in such a position of humility. Because then they could get their own snack. Their own water. Their own pacifier. And they could stop pestering Mommy and Daddy for all the things they depend on us for.

Children might be in a position of humility, but they rarely act humble about their humility. Kids think the world revolves around them. They desire to be the greatest. They think that their works and their actions deserve rewards. Sound familiar.

Children might be in a position of humility, but they don't humble themselves.

Jesus said, "**Whoever humbles himself like this child.**" Because he was trying to emphasize the child's position in life. He was emphasizing that to be great, we must be submissive. To be great, we must think and act out of dependence on God's Will.

Children might be in a position of humility, but they don't act in humility and they don't humble themselves. Therefore, Children are not the answer to our question of the day. So, who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

[False Answer #2]

If we are trying to find someone who displayed childlike humility, then maybe we can focus not on the present, but instead focus on the past and one of the founders of our faith. Being a Lutheran congregation, Martin Luther himself, might be considered the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

There are many stories about Luther's childlike humility. How he acted out of dependence on God. In fact, you might say Luther's dependence on God was what brought him into the ministry.

The story of Luther's decision to become a Monk basically involved Luther, as a 21 year old college student, getting stuck in a lightning storm. In fear and desperation Luther cried out, "Help me, St. Anne! And I will become a monk!"

Luther was spared the storm and immediately dropped out of law school, gave away all his possessions, and entered the monastic life.

As a monk, Luther was the model of submissive humility. And yet, he felt unable to come near the righteous God. Because he himself was NOT righteous.

Even when Luther nailed the famous 95 theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, he did so out of humility. He considered his theses to be points of debate that surely the Pope saw as errors. It never even entered his mind that his arguments might be unique.

Luther considered himself to be nothing but “poor stinking maggot-fodder.” Yet in humility, Luther’s teaching changed the world and brought about a restoration of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone. Today, his teachings have brought about a reformation that is celebrating its 500th anniversary next month.

Luther humbled himself like a child. Therefore, Luther must be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

However, Luther also failed...

The Reformation that Luther started spun out of control and Luther fractured the universal Christian church. Luther was the catalyst for 1,000’s of other reformers to build steam.

Luther’s vast learning made him stubborn and unwilling to bend or compromise. Luther suffered from severe depression over the stress of leading a reformation. He would doubt God’s ability to be in control. At times Luther would even doubt God’s love.

Luther, at the end of his life, would go on long tirades and personal attacks against his opponents. He would slander and express horrible un-diplomatic comments.

You see, Luther may have been humble, but Luther was not the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Luther may have been a great man, but Luther was not the greatest man.

[True Answer]

So, we are still stuck. We still haven’t figured out who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said that the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven must be someone who is humble like a child. Yet both children and Luther, himself, failed to ultimately be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Who then is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven is humble like a child.
The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven submits to their heavenly Father.
The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven depends on God for everything.
The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven prays and pesters God out of humility.
The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven trusts that God's will is better than their own.

Jesus is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is the only one who can satisfy all the requirements. Jesus is not only humble like a child, but Jesus humbled himself to the point of being a child. Being a son of man who is also fully the child of God.

Jesus displayed humility by being submissive to the will of his Heavenly Father. Even to the point of death. Jesus depended on God for everything and Jesus' attitude of dependence is shown in the Lord's Prayer. Where Jesus teaches us to pray and pester God for our daily bread.

Jesus trusted that God's will was better than his own. Jesus taught us to pray. "Thy will be done." Jesus, himself modeled that prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. On the eve of his betrayal he prayed, "Not my will, but thy will be done."

Jesus is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is the perfection of childlike humility. In our theme for this upcoming year, we will emphasize His example. Thy will be done. This phrase will be on our lips and on our minds.

[Conclusion]

Thy will be done. Jesus shows us the way to be great. On our own, we arrogantly desire to be the greatest in the church and the world. We think that by our works, learning, and position we are better than our neighbor.

But Jesus creates humility in us by reminding us of our dependence on God our Father for everything, including salvation.

Jesus creates humility in us by helping us to understand our role in salvation. The role of a bystander. Furthermore, Jesus forgives our arrogance and promises us the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven and Jesus saw fit to make you great. Jesus turns your hearts to become like children. Jesus' example humbles you like children.

Jesus is your entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.

"Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." (Heb 13:20-21)
