

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**October 2, 2022**  
**Matthew 18:1–14 (NRSV adapted)**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles themselves like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

“If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of things that cause stumbling blocks! Such things are bound to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!

“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

Over the last several months, we have looked at different images, metaphors and stories told by Jesus. Many of those images and stories gave us an insight into who Jesus is. And others described attributes of the Kingdom of God, or how God would order the world. Today’s reading is an extension of these understandings but focuses on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. What it looks like for those that want to follow in the way of Jesus and exhibit in their own lives a glimpse of God’s kingdom.

Our story opens with a question from the disciples. They ask, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” This question comes from the disciples after they have seen Jesus on the top of a mountain next to Elijah and Moses, when Jesus is transfigured in a bright shining light and a voice comes from heaven to declare that Jesus is “my Son, the beloved.” But directly before and after that amazing moment, Jesus has also told the disciples he will suffer and be killed in Jerusalem, and not only that but that those that would follow him will need to take up the cross and follow him.

It's no wonder the disciples ask a question about greatness. I imagine they are very confused. We have the vision of hindsight and the perspective of time and multiple stories about who Jesus is to get a better version. The disciples don't have that luxury, and so it seems that once

again they don't quite get it. The teachings of Jesus have not sunk into their understanding. Maybe they are still mesmerized by the image of the prophet Elijah and the law-giver Moses, giants of their faith tradition, standing next to Jesus on top of the mountain. Maybe they have heard the part about the kingdom of heaven drawing near, but they have failed to truly hear Jesus' description of what that kingdom looks like or is, and they are preoccupied with status and their place in the kingdom.

It's human to wonder about your place and your status. To wonder who is the greatest. Who is the best. We celebrate the teams that win the Super Bowl. We debate which athlete is the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time. (It's Serena Williams, by the way). Television stations are breaking into whatever their regularly scheduled programming is to show every at bat for Aaron Judge as he chases Roger Maris's record for the most homeruns in a single season. He is currently tied for the record (61) and has five more games to beat the record.

And it isn't just athletes. We lift-up celebrities and influencers by noting how many followers on Instagram or Tik Tok they have. Lists of box office receipts for each movie every week are tracked so we know what movie has made the most money. Magazines annually make a list of the most powerful people in Hollywood. Charts are kept for every genre of music and songs are racked. There is prestige for an author based on how many weeks their book is listed as number one on the New York Times bestseller list.

Attention is given to those with wealth and status. Forbes tracks the richest people in the world and annually produces its list ranking them by their amount of wealth, the richest person in the world at the top. Not only does Forbes make a list of the wealthiest people in the world, but they also make a ranking of the most powerful people in the world. The

list has heads of state, many of whom are dictators or wield their power as an authoritarian ruler. Many who are on the list of the wealthiest also make the list of the most powerful.

And there are the things we are told and sold that feed into our understanding of power and status, of our need to know who is the greatest. What is the best car, the finest wine, the must have technology, the most prestigious school, the fanciest watch, the most exclusive designer. And on and on. It seems we can relate more to the disciples than we might care to admit, the question of greatness and status has not gone away.

Jesus' response does not imitate the things of this world. He does not talk about military might, political office, wealth and power, celebrity, or dominance. Instead, he offers a corrective and a critique in the form of a little child. He calls for a little child and Jesus quite literally puts at the center of them and tells them that they must become like that child, or they will never enter the kingdom.

Several commentators and preachers through the years have taken this example of the becoming like a child to focus on attributes of a child. To be like a child is to be humble, innocent, open and trusting, and vulnerable and dependent. Those connotations can be true, but they are also a more modern understanding of how we think about children. In the ancient world, "children did not signify purity and innocence... They occupied ambivalent social locations. Parents cared for them, protected them, and valued them for their future economic contributions as workers and providers of care and support for elderly parents."<sup>i</sup>

Children were without status or rights in the ancient world. They were vulnerable and completely dependent on the good will of others. And notice that Jesus doesn't say that we should have the faith of a child, but rather he says we should humble ourselves to be like a child. That is,

without status and power. Giving up all pretensions of self-importance, independence, and self-reliance. This call of Jesus is not so much a call to emulate the characteristics of a child as it is to accept a radical understanding of status and power. The primary rule of the community of Jesus is to give up this pursuit for status and to accept our dependence on God and our place in the family of faith.

And then Jesus takes it even further by saying anyone who welcome a child welcome Jesus himself. Jesus, who just stood alongside Moses and Elijah, pillars of the faith, has now associated himself with a child – one without power or status. This will not be the first or last time that Jesus identifies himself with those that are powerless and, on the margins, telling the disciples that our response to such people is, in essence, our response to him. To receive a child is to be genuinely humble because the vulnerable dependent child can do nothing to further our own selfish ambitions. There can be no hidden agenda or ulterior motives because there is nothing to be gained. In receiving a child, one can no longer be concerned with greatness.

And then, perhaps in a shocking way, Jesus uses stunning imagery, threats even for those that would mistreat these little ones. To be clear, this is hyperbolic, exaggerated imagery to make a dramatic point. “Not only is it necessary to become a “little one” to enter the kingdom of heaven, but there is a dire warning for any who would lead “little ones” astray. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus places a special burden on those who would be leaders in the community. Woe to those who, instead of embracing little ones, cause them to stumble or lose their faith!”<sup>ii</sup>

The faith community is to uplift and help. To take special care for the marginalized and vulnerable. To put them at the center of what we do. The mark of our faithfulness is how we care for the little ones. To drive

the point home further, Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep. Where one has strayed from the flock of one hundred and the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine behind to go after the one. The focus and the concern are on the lost sheep. If there is one falling behind, the flock must wait until that one is restored.

The other day, my Facebook page reminded me of a post I had created back in 2016. I had posted a quote from Parker Palmer's book, "Healing the Heart of Democracy." Palmer is a sociologist, writer, and activist and founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal. The book was a call to our better angels and an antidote to the fractured, cynical, and winner-take-all approach to public life, to our politics and democracy.

He wrote, "When we forget that politics is about weaving a fabric of compassion and justice on which everyone can depend, the first to suffer are the most vulnerable among us, our children, our elderly, our mentally ill, our poor, and our homeless. As they suffer, so does the integrity of our democracy." At our best, Palmer suggests, we all should work together for the common good, to have a broken open heart for the most vulnerable.

More than twenty years ago, when Kelly and I first lived in the Twin Cities, there was a campaign by a non-profit that was working on the wellbeing of children. As part of that campaign, there were bumper stickers that said, "So, how are the children?"

This was an adaptation of a traditional greeting from the Masai people. The Maasai are a nomadic tribe in East Africa, who live in the Great Rift Valley of Tanzania and Kenya. The traditional greeting that is passed between them is "Kasserian Ingera," which translates to, "And how are the children." In the custom, when one member of the tribe greets the other, the first says, "And how are the children?" and the traditional response, if things are good, is "All the children are well." Even

members of the tribe with no children of their own give the traditional answer, “All the children are well.”

Not just some, but all the children are well. Peace and safety prevail. This simple greeting permeates their entire existence and shows that their way of life places a priority on protecting the young and the powerless.

As one preacher says, the “Maasai society has not forgotten its reason for being, its proper functions and responsibilities. ‘All the children are well’ means that life is good. It means that the daily struggles for existence do not preclude proper caring for their young.”<sup>iii</sup>

What does it look like to follow in the ways of Jesus? “And how are the children?” What would it look like if this was our primary question? That same preacher wonders... “And how are the children?” I wonder if we heard that question and passed it along to each other a dozen times a day, if it would begin to make a difference in the reality of how children are thought of or cared about in our own country.

I wonder if every adult among us, parent and non-parent alike, felt an equal weight for the daily care and protection of all the children in our community, in our town, in our state, in our country... I wonder if we could truly say without any hesitation, “The children are well, yes, all the children are well.”

What would it be like... if the minister began every worship service by answering the question, "And how are the children?" If every town leader had to answer the question at the beginning of every meeting: “And how are the children? Are they all well?” Wouldn't it be interesting to hear their answers? What would it be like? I wonder...

So, how are the children? Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/who-is-the-greatest-2/commentary-on-matthew-181-9-2>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/who-is-the-greatest/commentary-on-matthew-181-9>

<sup>iii</sup> Patrick O'Neill, <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/and-how-are-the-children>