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Pentecost 12

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Learning to Ride the Gospel”
Text: Matthew 18:1-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In common thinking, the phase of life called childhood is something to pass through. But for Jesus, to become as a child is something to attain, and a place to remain.

In common thinking, children need to be taught to become adults. But for Jesus, adults need to be taught to become like children.

In common thinking, children grow up to *become* something great. But for Jesus, greatness is in *being* like a child.

Clearly, Jesus is looking at things quite differently than we often do.

For being a child with Jesus has nothing to do with your age. Whether you are the youngest of the young or the oldest of the old, *you are a child in Jesus' eyes.*

Being a child with Jesus has nothing to do with how much you know. Whether you have been a Christian all your life and know your Scriptures and catechism well, or you are just beginning in this life of faith, *you are a child in Jesus' eyes.*

Being a child with Jesus has nothing to do with how you act or your level of spiritual maturity. Whether you are a pastor or a layman, an apostle or a catechumen, a leader or a learner, *you are a child in Jesus' eyes.*

And so the disciples' question today, **“Jesus, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”** betrays the fact that they are not thinking as Jesus thinks, or seeing as Jesus sees. And so Jesus rattles them good! No beating around the bush with Jesus. He grabs a child - who, by the way, always seem to be around Jesus, have you ever noticed that? He grabs a child, stands him (or her) right in the midst of these big disciples and says: *Here you go. Greatness. Be like this child. Humble yourselves. And if you don't, you will never, ever, not in a million years or a million tries, enter the kingdom of heaven.*

As usual, the disciples got more than they bargained for. But its always that way with Jesus. He is always giving more than we ask or imagine or think. And so the disciples ask a **greatness** question, and Jesus gives a **faith** answer.

For that's really what this is. It's not primarily about what we do, it's about faith. For to be a child as Jesus is describing here means to be dependent. To be dependent upon your Father in heaven, like a child, for everything - to supply your needs, to give you your identity, to rescue you, and to protect you from your enemies. It is to acknowledge that you are, in fact, *utterly* dependent and in need of Christ and His provision. It is to be weak and vulnerable, and to learn to see yourself in this way.

For no matter how strong or high or learned or powerful you may be in the world and in the eyes of the world, none of that matters when it comes to the kingdom of heaven. Here, greatness is quite different. Here, greatness is to be among those whom Christ serves. And to see others and to serve others in the same way.

And the rest of Jesus' words today are a commentary on this. That when you see a fellow disciple who is struggling or hurting or wandering or alone or in desperate need, *at that moment* you have seen the one who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **And to receive such a one is to receive Jesus Himself.**

Those are **huge** words! Life and thought-shifting words, if you take them seriously. For too often we think like the disciples. That the one who is struggling or hurting or wandering or alone or in desperate need needs to grow up out of that and become a strong Christian, a useful Christian, a really good Christian! (Like me!) Or, maybe we make the opposite mistake, and put that burden on ourselves - that *I* shouldn't be this way, that I need to grow up in my faith, that I need to be better and not struggle so much. But that is not to think as Jesus.

And temptations to sin? How often do you just brush off your sinful thoughts and words and deeds and desires, and not even think about how they may have led others into sin. But **Woe!** Jesus says. *Woe to you and to me.* Our sin is much more serious than we think. So serious, in fact, that it is better - *better!* - to have cement shoes and be drowned in the depth of the sea. It is better - *better!* - to hack off your hands and feet and pluck out your eyes than to be thrown into the hell of fire. Jesus is speaking a whole new kind of serious here.

And then there's even more. Do you care enough to go after the one who wanders and is at risk? Or are you satisfied because we're still meeting our budget, or happy that you don't have to put up with their weakness anymore, or not so worried because they weren't doing anything really important in church anyhow. Do you care enough to confront our brother or sister caught in sin? Do you even bother to pray for them even once or twice? Or are they not worth the time and effort and

strength and attention of us “great ones,” who have stuck it out, who haven’t wandered, who are so dedicated and giving and faithful? Jesus is speaking a whole new kind of ugly here. Like the disciples, how wrong we often think.

And so it is good to ask again: **Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** And to perhaps listen with new ears.

Do you see that person coming to baptism? That adult filled with sin, that baby born in sin. *That one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

Do you see that person sitting in the pew, struggling with sin, with tear-filled eyes of unworthiness, not even looking at you when you speak to him, because he is too ashamed? *That one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

Do you see that person at communion, that great sinner who offended you the other day? Do you see them opening their mouth to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, and the forgiveness they need, and saying *Amen* to Christ’s *for you*? *That one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

Do you see that person no longer physically able to come to church anymore? Do you see that little one struggling to say the words of the Lord’s Prayer? Do you see that one back in church after so long a time away? *That one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

These are the children of God. **And you, too.** When you are like this, and even when you think you’re not. For you are the one. Yes, you. And them. The one Jesus comes for and goes after. To bring you back. To forgive you.

And so you are the greatest when you are the least, for then all that you are and all that you have is of Christ and not of yourself, as He supplies your need, as He gives you your identity as His child, as He rescues you, and as He protects you. For greatness in the kingdom of heaven is not to accomplish the most, but to receive Christ and what He has done for you. For He has come and given His hand and feet and eyes in place of yours. He has taken the millstone you deserve and put it around His neck. He was cast into the hell of fire on the cross, for you, in your place.

And so if it is *better* for you to be hacked and plucked and drowned, **far better** is it for you that Jesus has come to do this for you! That the Father has sent His child, His beloved Son, to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). That you have a faithful Father, a Good Shepherd, and a Spirit given to you and living in you. A Spirit by which we pray, “*Abba! Father!*” (Romans 8:15) as His children, and knowing that our Father has heard our prayer for Jesus’ sake, and will always do what is best and

good for us.

Which doesn't mean that there will always be a happy ending. Children learn that, too. There is still unbelief in the world, satan is raging, and hell is real. But with His teaching here, *Jesus is unleashing the twelve with the Gospel*. Like a child that receives a new bike and can't wait to ride it all day, so are His children with the Gospel. Loving, searching, praying, caring, and forgiving, until the sun goes down and they're forced to come in. *That's Christ in the world.*

And why are children that way? So free and care free? Because they know Mom and Dad are taking working and taking care of the serious stuff, the stuff they need, stuff they don't even know about. And so it is with you, and with your Father in heaven, with Christ crucified, risen, and ascended to the throne of God, and with the Spirit of holiness and life. He is working. Count on it. For ***Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*** Working! More **huge** words! Promise words. Words you can count on as you ride the Gospel all day, until your Father calls you to come into your heavenly home.

And with those words - did you notice? - we're back where we started - except now ***the child in the midst of us is the very Son of God.*** And He really is. Not just in some mystical way - *He really is!* In His very Body and Blood, given to you here in the midst of your sin and mess. But He is not ashamed of you, to give Himself to you, to forgive you and give you life again. He is happy that you're here. Not because of all that you accomplished this week, but because you are His little one. Which makes you great. For in the end, greatness is not what you do, it's who you are. And *you* are a child of God. Believe it!

Now go ride that Gospel all day long.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.