

6 September 2026
Pentecost 15

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Caught in the Trap, Set Free by the Cross”
Text: Matthew 18:1-20; Romans 13:1-10

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

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

Why would you ask such a question? The answer, I think, is obvious. They wanted Jesus to say: *you are*. You are the ones I have chosen. You are the ones who have followed me. You are. Because maybe some of them were struggling. Or having doubts. Or just wanted a pat on the back; an “Atta boy!” A little recognition. Some praise. Following Jesus wasn’t easy, after all.

Which you understand. We all like that, want that. The promotion at work, a little recognition for all our hard work, some praise. And that’s okay. That’s the way the world works. Or is supposed to. That’s what Paul was talking about in the Epistle from Romans today. The authorities set-up by God are to praise the good and punish the evil. To maintain order in the world so there is not chaos. That’s what the Law is for. So it isn’t right when the slacker gets the promotion, when our hard work is ignored, and when it seems that all we get is criticism.

That’s how it is in the world, or as theology calls it, *the kingdom of the left*, or God’s left hand kingdom. But that’s not the question asked by the disciples today. They asked, ***Who is the greatest*** - not in the kingdom of the left, the world, but ***in the kingdom of heaven?*** In what theology calls *the kingdom of the right*, or God’s right hand kingdom? Both kingdoms are God’s. Both are ruled by Him. Just in very different ways . . .

God’s **left hand kingdom** is ruled by the Law. It is about punishments and rewards. About getting what you earn and deserve. But God’s **right hand kingdom** is ruled by the Gospel. It is about grace. About getting what you do not deserve: God’s mercy and love. Two *very* different kingdoms. Which we need to keep straight! You cannot keep order in the world with grace and forgiveness, and the church is not about punishments and rewards. Both are necessary, and both are good, when kept in their proper place.

So when the disciples ask Jesus ***Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*** He gives them a very Gospel answer. *He puts a child in their midst.* **For the greatest in the kingdom of heaven isn't the one who does the most** (like in the world), it's not the one who stands before you in an alb and stole - **it's the one who needs the most and receives it.** The Canaanite woman who begs for her daughter's life. The tax collector who says, *God, be merciful to me, the sinner.* The leper who cries out for cleansing. The ones who can do nothing, but for whom Jesus does everything.

So take a look around. Not out there, *but in here.* What do you see? People who are maybe successful in the world, *but in here?* In here are Canaanite women, tax collectors, and lepers. In here are sinners, one and all. People struggling. People failing. Failing to love God as we ought. Failing to love our neighbor as ourselves. Ones who on the basis of the Law (frankly) deserve not a promotion to heaven, but a demotion to hell.

But now take *another* look around . . . *there's someone else here.* Someone who has come not to condemn, but to save. Who knows your struggles, who knows your weaknesses, who knows all your failures. And is here to forgive. The one who really is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven was standing right in front of the disciples that day in human flesh! And He is here for you the same. ***To seek and to save the lost.*** To serve you. For you are His child. He wants to give you not what you deserve, but what you don't - His gifts. His mercy and love. And He wants for you to receive them, as His child, with joy.

So now take *another* look around again . . . past the obvious, past the appearances, past the surface . . . do you see now a church full of children? A church full of greatness? That is seeing with the eyes of faith. Seeing as Jesus sees, not as the world sees.

That's why Jesus then talks the way He does, as we heard today, about the seriousness of sin. About causing someone else to sin, and being caught in sin. Because to Him, it's not just about rules, about right and wrong - *it's about His children!* Don't mess with His children! If you do, drowning by millstone and cutting off your body parts is better! And that's not hyperbole - *Jesus means it!*

But while that may be ***better, best*** is to not try to save yourself by self-mutilation, penance, or trying to pay the price yourself - but to be the Canaanite woman, the tax collector, the leper, and receive the mercy and forgiveness won for you by the one who came and took the millstone for you and had His body parts not cut off, but almost! The one who had them nailed to the cross for you. Who laid down His life for you. The one who allowed the trap of sin and death to snap shut on Him so that you

be set free.

For that's really the picture Jesus is painting for us today - that of a trap snapping shut. The traps that satan is setting and leaving for you all around, luring you into the captivity sin and then ultimately eternal death. For when we heard today Jesus talking about ***temptations to sin*** or ***causing to sin***, the word there is ***skandalon***. And a ***skandalon*** is a trap or a snare for catching prey. Think of it like one of those old animal traps that would lure its prey into the midst of it with food and then snap shut - trapping the animal in its grip. And once caught, what then? Either cut off or gnaw off a hand or foot, or die in its grip. So better, Jesus is saying, to cut off a hand or foot than to die in your sin. Which is true.

But there's something else the Bible calls a ***skandalon*** . . . and that is **the cross of Jesus**. So the cross of Jesus, it is often said, is a scandal, an offense. But this, too: it is the place where our foolishness, sin, and death snapped shut on Jesus and caused His death. Or maybe to say it this way: where He took your place to set you free. Which is the word used in the Bible for *forgiveness* - *to let go, to set free*.

So Jesus came ***to seek*** those caught in the traps of sin and death and ***to save us*** from them. To pry them open and set us free. For Jesus doesn't want anyone to perish in them. And Jesus then tells us who have been set free to do the same. That if your brother sins against you, if you see him caught in the trap of sin, go and try to set him free! Tell him his fault and be ready to forgive. But do so in humility and gentleness. For if you've ever seen a nature show and seen an animal caught in one of those traps, you know that even when the person approaches to set it free, the animal growls and lunges *at the person trying to help* because it is afraid. And people caught in sin may do the same. They're afraid. They're ashamed. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it! Just know it won't be easy.

But that forgiveness isn't the end. Once an animal is released from a trap like that, it has been wounded; it needs healing. And sin wounds us. Maybe we don't realize it at first, like the animal once in the trap but now set free is filled with adrenaline runs away. But later the hurt and pain comes. So we continue to care for one another. And Jesus is here to continue to heal us with His comforting words and balm of forgiveness, His cleansing bath of baptism, and the nourishing food of His Body and Blood. That set free and healed and strengthened by Him, we can then care for one another.

But remember: that isn't what makes you great - Jesus makes you great! It's just how His children live. What Jesus and His Spirit are working in us. For ***the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*** is here for us, in His risen from the dead, freed from the traps of sin and death, flesh and blood. We know that because Jesus said - or better

to say, *promised!* - ***where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*** So it isn't because of the greatness or size or beauty of the church that Jesus is here, but because His children are here, and He is here for us. And because He is, who's the greatest isn't the question. It is enough to be His children. To receive all that He has done for us.

And when the one who is here for us *now* comes *again* - no longer hidden in water, words, and bread and wine - but when He comes visibly, in His glory . . . if you think the disciples were surprised at the answer Jesus gave them that day to ***who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*** . . . imagine how surprised we will be on that day! What we will see! Who we will see! And that the greatest is not the one who did the most or rose the highest in the church, but the one who received the most. A child in the arms of His Father and Saviour.

So on this Labor Day weekend, when we honor our work and the value of work, we get a good reminder from Jesus today . . . that greatness in the kingdom of God's right hand, in the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of His Son, seated at His right hand, doesn't come by what you do but because of who you are - a baptized child of God. Dearly loved. And that as His child, you have a place in His home, forever. And you just can't get any greater than that!

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.