

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
[www.lutheranlccf.org](http://www.lutheranlccf.org)  
**Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, August 11, 2013**

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 18, 366:5, 358, 456, 640:1.

Lessons: 1 Kings 3:3-14, James 3:13-4:3, Mark 9:30-37.

Sermon Text: Matthew 18:1-5.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? We might think of some of the characters in the Bible like Abraham, Moses or the apostle Paul. When the disciples asked Jesus that question they wanted to know which of them would be the greatest. They all expected to have positions of importance in Jesus' Kingdom and each of them would've liked to be Jesus right-hand man.

Jealousy, personal pride and vanity showed here. It may have appeared to them that Jesus was 'playing favorites' and Peter, James and John were the likeliest candidates for the position of "greatest in the kingdom of heaven". Earlier that same day Jesus had selected Peter to catch the fish with the coin in its mouth to pay the temple tax for himself and for Jesus. Jesus had taken Peter, James and John with him to the mountain of the transfiguration. And those three did not report what had happened there, just as Jesus had told them to. They also remember that Jesus had taken the same three with him when he went into the house of Jairus to raise that man's 12-year-old daughter from the dead. And Peter often assumed the role of leadership by speaking up on behalf of all the disciples.

So we can understand why the other disciples wondered about their positions in the kingdom they thought that Jesus was soon going to establish. It was necessary for Jesus to speak to them a number of times on this same subject. Today let's listen as we hear about

**WHO WILL BE THE GREATEST IN HEAVEN?**

1. **Jesus' disciples each wanted to be the greatest.**
2. **Jesus points to a little child and emphasizes that**
3. ***"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."***

Jesus had noticed the disciples arguing on the road to Capernaum. They were arguing about who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Mark reports that when Jesus first asked the disciples what they were talking about, they remained silent. As the Son of God, he knew what they had been talking about. But urged by the Lord, they asked him as reported in our sermon text.

Why were they concerned about the matter of greatness? This is certainly a very human trait. We all want to be important in some way. As we just mentioned, Jesus had seemed – to their human reckoning – to play favorites, with Peter, James, and John seeming to be first in line. Two times he'd taken three of his disciples aside as special witnesses. These things were puzzling to men who did not know the whole story as we do. But we also see their sinful hearts and Jesus was concerned about that. Yes, Jesus had given those three disciples much. But to whom much is given, of him shall much be required, as Jesus tells us in Luke 12:48: ***"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded."***

It is obvious that they were thinking of an earthly kingdom, just as many today are falsely expecting Jesus to come again and set up an earthly kingdom for a thousand years.

They ask Jesus ***"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*** Jesus had repeatedly tried to tell them that his kingdom is not a visible, physical, temporal kingdom, but consists of his ruling as king in the hearts of

his believers. But that idea was still too difficult for them to grasp. At this time Jesus gave an answer totally different from what they expected. In the kingdom of heaven greatness is not a matter of titles and authority. Jesus could not have made it plainer than he did to Pontius Pilate at his trial when Pilate asked him if he were king of the Jews. ***“Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.’”*** (John 18:36)

They just didn’t understand the concept of greatness in Jesus’ Kingdom. So Jesus gave them a lesson about greatness and humility in a way that they would not easily forget. Jesus called a little child into their midst and pointed to that child as an example of greatness in his kingdom. He warns the disciples that no one can even enter into his kingdom without becoming like a little child.

What was Jesus thinking of when he pointed to a child? We think of traits such as humility, trust, faith, and confidence. Matthew quotes Jesus in emphasizing the child’s humility. We read that Jesus ***“said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”***

Humility means, first of all, recognizing personal sinfulness and unworthiness and inability to do anything at all to become worthy before God and earn any part of our eternal salvation. Humility depends entirely on God’s mercy for forgiveness and salvation. It looks to Jesus Christ as the Savior, who offered up himself as the perfect sacrifice for all sins.

Humility is not about self-esteem. It’s about honoring or esteeming someone else, first honoring God and Jesus Christ whom he sent. Whoever humbles himself God will exalt and whoever exalts himself God will humble.

Jesus himself is the perfect example of God-pleasing humility. He came down from heaven, setting aside his glory and became one of us. He was born in a lowly stable and he submitted to all the laws God had given to his chosen people, Israel. He never used his divine powers for his own convenience or comfort. He did perform miracles while he was on earth. But those miracles were performed so that people might come to believe in him as the Son of God. He allowed sinful people to mistreat him, condemn him, and crucify him. And he endured all these things for us. That was the purpose for which he had come into the world. Now God has highly exalted him. He is at the right hand of the Father and he rules the whole world in the interest of his kingdom. On the day of eternal judgment every knee must bow before him and every tongue must admit that Jesus Christ is Lord. For believers, this will be mean great joy on judgment day. For unbelievers this will be a confession admitting to their damnation because they have ***“not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”*** (John 3:18)

All who humbly follow him in this life will share his glory in the life to come.

We could look at other traits of a child, things like trust, faith, and confidence. A child believes you until or unless you do something to shake that trust that he or she has in you.

Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel lesson ***“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’”*** (Mark 9:36-37)

Jesus’ followers must become like children, in simplicity of faith, in unqualified acceptance of Bible-truths, in trusting humility. A child trusts his parents. He or she trusts the truthfulness, the ability, and the care the parents will give him or her. This same condition of mind and heart is necessary in disciples of Christ if they wish to enter into the kingdom of heaven. There must be no consideration of honor and glory before men, no false ambition, no scheming for power, because all of this is contrary to the spirit of Jesus Christ. Do not think, as Luther says, about becoming great, but about becoming small. The honor and exaltation will come in due time, in heaven, if humility is first. To become humble as a little child, and not just to pretend humility, that is true greatness in the kingdom of heaven.

To be first in Christ’s kingdom in heaven means to be the last, to be the servants. Service means sacrificing your time, your talents and your treasures – in short, sacrificing yourself for the sake of others even when they do not realize it or appreciate it. Yes, even helping a child in Jesus’ name spiritually, physically or

emotionally. It's great when you do such things in Jesus name, that is, because you love Jesus and you welcome Jesus into your heart and life.

The general rule in the world is that that person is a leader and acknowledged as being first who has others working for him and doing work serving him. In the Church of Jesus the reverse is true. There the rank is in proportion to the service offered. The humbler a person is and the more willing he is to serve his fellow-men, the higher he will stand in the kingdom of God.

This is the complete opposite of how the world looks at it. It was a lesson that Jesus gave his disciples again and again. For example, we read in Mark 10: *"Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask.' 'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked. They replied, 'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.' 'You don't know what you are asking,'" Then we read that Jesus said "to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" (Mark 10:35-45) Jesus tells us in Matthew 23:8-12: *"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."**

That Jesus used a child to illustrate his answer brings a critical lesson to our own age, an age with so many unwanted children and with a murderous mania among men for aborting unborn children and abusing growing children. It is only those who are members of the kingdom of heaven by faith in Christ Jesus who have the right answer and the right motivation. What greater reason can we have for sharing the gospel? Genuine Christian humility will show itself in our attitude toward children.

Jesus speaks of welcoming a little child in his name as a service done to him personally. We welcome little children in Jesus name, first of all, by recognizing that children are gifts of God and not grievous burdens. We serve Jesus by providing for the needs of our children. That means not only food and shelter and clothing and loving care, but above all, bringing them to Jesus in holy baptism and training them to know and love and obey their Savior. And if the Lord does not see fit to give us any children, there are many ways we can help to provide for the needs of children in our community, in our church, and in other parts of the world. Those who serve their Savior by serving others in his name, without concern for personal greatness, are the greatest in the kingdom of Christ.

Instead of urging ambition for high position and power, Christ knows of only one valid reason for fame before him and his Father. That is humble, unpretentious service, without a thought of reward. He took a little child, placed it in their midst, hugged it in his arms to show his deep regard, his tender love for children, and then told the disciples, that in receiving a child, in serving one of these little ones, they were serving him. And a service shown to him is recognized in heaven as though it had been shown to God himself. This is a powerful lesson that is especially timely today. So who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? *"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* May we humble ourselves in service to Jesus each day. Amen.