

The Value of Little Ones

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost) is Matthew 18:1-20. This text includes four narratives: Who is the Greatest, Temptation to sin, The Parable of the Lost Sheep, and If your brother sins against you. The thread of the value of “little ones” runs through each of these four accounts. Sometimes “little ones” refers to physicality, sometimes in faith matters and sometimes to both.

In our first narrative the disciples are having a discussion about which of them will be the greatest when Jesus conquers the Romans. They all expected to have positions of importance in Jesus’ kingdom, and each of them would have liked to be Jesus’ right-hand man. They were reflecting the long held thinking on the part of the Jews concerning the role of the coming Savior.

When Jesus places a small child in their midst Jesus is proclaiming that the greatest in the reign of heaven is the one who is, in fact, in a condition of lowly powerlessness and who willingly acknowledges his own emptiness and utter inability in spiritual things. Greatness in the kingdom is characterized by humble trust in the Lord.

So great are little ones in the sight of God that anyone offending them would be better off being drowned in the depths of the sea.

Shifting from the danger of causing another to stumble, Jesus reminds His disciples that all must live vigilantly as they follow in His way. They must be aware that they, too, will encounter causes of stumbling. Jesus is not teaching self-mutilation, for even a blind man can lust. The point is that we should deal as drastically with sin as necessary.

In the parable of the lost sheep a wrong understanding or worldview is being condemned, not just the belittling of children. Jesus shifts gears but continues with the idea that people are helpless children by comparing them to helpless sheep. Even after one sheep has stumbled away, God is committed to retrieving it. The heavenly Father wants all to be saved (cf 1 Tm 2:4).

In the fourth section Jesus commands the Church to do all it can to regain an unrepentant sinner. To humbly and lovingly speak to such a brother or sister is to follow the example of the shepherd who searched for one lost sheep. Christ has promised to stand behind the actions of the Church in either forgiving or refusing to forgive sins. We need personally to cherish His gifts and to present His Law and Gospel to anyone caught in the grip of sin. Through the precious gift of forgiveness, the door of heaven is opened to each repentant sinner.

Prayer: Give me a heart, O Father, that is humble and that cares about each of your little ones. Amen.
(TLSB)

