

2019 NL1 Ash Wednesday Matthew 18  
19-03-06 Matthew 18:1-9

**Matthew 18:1-9**

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 He called a child, whom he put among them, 3 and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. 6 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, 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.

7 Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! 8 "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. 9 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.

God's beloved people, grace and peace to you in the name of our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ.....Amen.....

There is the sweetest picture in the narthex in that collage of pictures where all you see is the hands of two children intertwined. It is total sweetness. A picture of innocence. It is a picture of humble and genuine care and ease.

It's no wonder Jesus uses a child as an object lesson when the disciples were asking about greatness in the kingdom of heaven. "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" they asked. They had obviously been talking about it, even though Jesus had just told them that he would be betrayed, killed and raised again on the third day.

And they come to him asking who is the greatest? Maybe the news of Jesus' demise flustered them. After all that they had seen him do and say, how could he be killed? Isn't HE the greatest?

Or maybe they were wondering which one of them would have to take over as leader once Jesus was gone.... Or it could be that they were just wondering what it would take to be great. In any case, Jesus calls over a child and places her in their midst. "*Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest...*"

Jesus placing a child in their midst and calling her "*the greatest*" is as shocking as calling for the elimination of offending body parts in the face of sin – later in the lesson. Everything about Jesus is shocking and new, from his very presence to his teaching to his lifestyle. And eventually to his death and resurrection!

Little children didn't rate very high on the social structure of the day, so Jesus' teaching here is like: become the least, become the servant, become humble – not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. Become humble. They asked.... and Jesus answered.

Do you really want to know what true greatness is? Watch how someone treats the help when no one is looking... “You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him.”—*Malcolm S. Forbes*.

Over and over again, Jesus keeps teaching the same lesson: servanthood, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, love God and love your neighbor, become humble like this little child.

Treat the king, the pope and the beggar the same.... because we are all beggars before God.

Become humble and do not put stumbling blocks in front of these little ones, or you’ll trade that stumbling block for a millstone life-jacket. Treating little ones, defenseless ones, innocent ones, marginalized ones as inferior and pushing them out to the boundaries and the margins is worthy of swift and decisive judgement.

Jesus couldn’t be any more clear..... His kingdom is one that is for all. His kingdom is one where humility counts as the greatest. His kingdom is one that is the opposite of social boundaries and social climbing and status and seeking power.

Jesus’ kingdom is one of humility. “Humility” is of the same root word for human and “humus” = of the earth; the organic portion of soil such as decomposed leaves and other plant material; humility is literally the acknowledgement that we are dust and to dust we shall return. And that very truth puts us all on a level playing field. “*Ashes to ashes and dust to dust*” is the great equalizer that humbles everyone in the end.... no matter what your status may have been while walking on the top side of the grass.

So..... as a follower of Jesus..... as one who worships the living God.... as one who genuinely cares about God and the creation and creatures..... be like children, be humble, welcome children, do not tempt them to sin. Don’t trade stumbling blocks for millstones.

The world is full of stumbling blocks and occasions for sin – don’t add to it on purpose by being part of intentional sin.

Work for justice,  
stand with the orphan, the widow and the alien in your midst.

Remember we were aliens in the land of Egypt, most of us have ancestors who were aliens in this land.

Stand with the outcast. For by serving and welcoming these in Jesus’ name, you welcome Jesus.

Jesus called to a child..., took her by the hand..., placed her in their midst, and made her to feel the greatest of all.

You, child, are one whom Christ Jesus has called..., taken by the hand..., placed in his midst..., and made you the greatest of all by humbling himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

You are the greatest because Jesus has made it so..., and you show his children that they are the greatest by humbling yourself and making it so.

And while temptations will come at you, “*Woe to the world because.... occasions for stumbling are bound to come.*” Jesus has you by the hand.

From Psalm 37, “*Though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand.*” Even the most humble of us will stumble..., we are dust and ashes as this day reminds..., but like the picture in the narthex..., the Lord has you by the hand.

Amen.....