

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 7, 2008
Matthew 18:1-20

"Like A Child"

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

There is certainly a lot to consider in just the Gospel lesson for this day. In fact there is more than enough material here for several sermons on important subjects. We will briefly touch on some of these matters as well, but a continuing thought does run through these words and it has to do with a little child, little ones and their place in the kingdom of God. Indeed Jesus says, "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." On the basis of this word then, our theme is "Like a Child" and on a day (weekend) when we begin our Sunday School for the coming year and have just begun our Christian Day School year, there could be no better theme. May the Lord Himself bless us this day in our childlike faith as we hear His word.

I. The Child

At the beginning of the Gospel the disciples are again engaged in one of their "who is the greatest?" discussions. Jesus uses a very effective illustration to teach them. He calls a child to himself and places him in the middle of the disciples. Here is your example of who is the greatest. "For unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." The Gospel of Mark in relating this account adds the beautiful touch that Jesus took the child in his arms.

Now to a world that often engages in the game of who is the greatest these words should cause some serious thought. It does not belong to the loudest, the proudest, the biggest, the strongest. It is not a case of who is the most important. Rather it is to be like a child and in faith be held by Jesus. No truer words could be spoken but they are also words which clash mightily with our sinful nature, with our old man, with so much of the thoughts and desires of the world. But the words stand: "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." And Jesus continues, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me ..." We need to remember that these children are precious to Jesus. When we receive them in His name we receive Jesus Himself.

II. The Scandal

And that leads us to the scandal. Now in most English translations that might not be the word that you think of but it is the key word in the Greek. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea! Literally, the Greek says, scandalize

them. The word means to set a deadly trap. And these words of Jesus are so powerful. He says: One of these little ones who believe in me. We learn from this that little ones (Greek: micron) believe. They have faith. Of course they do, for that faith is the gift of God as much in their lives as in ours. A few verses later, Jesus says, "See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." They are precious in the eyes of God and the angels in heaven watch over them. So it is in another place that Jesus would say, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

And that brings us to a difficult but necessary discussion on this day. It has become apparent in the last week or so that the question of life has become a major part of the presidential campaign. The contrast in some ways could not be more stark. The nomination of Sarah Palin as vice president brought the matter to the forefront in a most unexpected way. In the discussion about her newborn son, who has Down's syndrome, I read and later heard on the radio an account of the fact that about 90% of those discovered by pre-natal testing to have that challenging condition are aborted by their parents. What an appalling state of affairs. So many have taken upon themselves the role of executioner of the smallest, the most needy, the most helpless. And what does that say of a great and powerful people? The pro-abortion (pro-choice) attitude of so many is the ultimate in selfishness and self-deception. If you have any doubt as to which of the candidates is pro-life or pro-abortion, just listen. It should not take you too long to figure it out. And listen to the words of Jesus, "See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones ..."

III. Learning like a child

The remaining portion of the Gospel is filled with many other images and exhortations. Jesus speaks of the one lost sheep among the 100. He talks about seeking after the fellow believer who has sinned. He talks about his presence amidst even the two or three who are gathered in his name. But let us return to the child in Jesus' midst. We are that child. We are loved by him so much that he gave His life for us. He would hold us in his arms as well. And there is peace. There is hope and assurance. This last week one of our families lost a child, not yet born, and yet greatly loved and wanted. The sadness that was experienced by them is a reminder of the sorrows that are a part of this world and the pilgrimage we travel in it. But to them as well is the promise of Jesus that He knows those who are his and he hold them in his hands. He knows us before we are born and he has formed our members. In a time of loss, it is a time for faith. It is a time for assurance in the love and grace of a God who has paid for the sins of the whole world with the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ.

And remember all the children in our midst. Your children and grandchildren. The children of your neighbors and friends. And bring them to Jesus. What a blessing that we have a Christian day school which plays an important role in that task. This church with its support of Christian education has made it one of its priorities. This day (weekend) we are also beginning again our Sunday School (which this year has taken as its title: Gospel Lights after the song, This little Gospel light of mine!) We thank God for the teachers and staff in all our

Christian education endeavors. Again, every opportunity we have to share and to witness and to bring these little ones to the Lord is a blessing.

Finally, don't forget that you are one of those little ones as well. "Unless you turn and become like children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." May your child-like faith in the Savior lead you into His arms forever.

Lord Jesus Christ, the children's friend
To each of them Your presence send;
Call them by name and keep them true
In loving faith, dear Lord, to You.

That all of us, Your children dear,
By Christ redeemed, may Christ revere;
Lead us in joy that all we do
Will witness to our love for You.

In Jesus' name. Amen.