

At that time^[a] the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “So who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² He called a small child and had him stand among them.³ “Truly I tell you,” he said, “unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵ And whoever welcomes^[b] one child like this in my name welcomes me.

⁶ “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea.⁷ Woe to the world because of offenses. For offenses will inevitably come, but woe to that person by whom the offense comes.⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to fall away, 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 be thrown into the eternal fire.⁹ And if your eye causes you to fall away, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hellfire.^[c]

¹⁰ “See to it that you don’t despise one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of my Father in heaven.^[d] ¹² What do you think? If someone has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, won’t he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go and search for the stray?¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over that sheep^[e] more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray.¹⁴ In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you,^[f] go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother.¹⁶ But if he won’t listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony^[g] of two or three witnesses every fact may be established.^[h] ¹⁷ If he doesn’t pay attention to them, tell the church.^[i] If he doesn’t pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you.¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound^[j] in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed^[k] in heaven.¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about any matter that you^[l] pray for, it will be done for you^[m] by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.”

Great

Each week I try to write a great sermon, the best sermon ever, but just look at our lesson this week. It’s a great big lesson. So much lesson, so little time. And in it we’ve got a great big question about greatness in the kingdom of God. But it’s a great lesson dealing not only with greatness but, children, millstones, eye gouging, lost sheep, restoration, and forgiveness. It’s a great big lesson that all starts with a question on greatness. And since we all know a thing or two about greatness I figure this will be great. We all strive to be great and excel in life. We strive for something that we can prove to the world around us that we are distinct, different, better than rest: Great.

The disciples are still thinking the same way. They want to be unique, different, better than the rest. After Jesus starts talking about a kingdom, they start thinking about where they will be in that kingdom. What positions will they have? Who will be the greatest? We’re 18 chapters into the book of Matthew. They’ve been studying under Jesus for two years now. They don’t have a whole lot of time for remedial education but they can’t seem to understand greatness in the kingdom of God. Even after Jesus tells a woman, “*You have great faith.*” They just don’t get it.

To be honest, neither do we. We struggle with this idea of wanting to be better. We’ll even brag about our humility but, it doesn’t make sense to brag about greatness in the homeless shelter, even less so in a morgue. So if we want to brag or boast about what we have that’s great. Let’s boast about our great God who has made us great. We’ve got a great big lesson today, let’s get started.

Jesus predicts his passion, suffering, and death and they ask him about greatness. “*Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?*” (18:1). Jesus has taught them repeatedly concerning the Kingdom of God. They are in search of

political positions in this kingdom. They are trying to follow Jesus and yet their minds are consumed by this question: status, power, position. It's not as if Jesus hasn't taught them about greatness or humility. Jesus put bad theology of display, called a woman a dog, and tried to walk away from her. Greatness doesn't depend on race or gender. If they can't understand that the Gentiles are a part of the Kingdom of God they certainly won't understand that children are either.

Instead of answering their question Jesus sets a child among them. This isn't an infant, just a child, neuter, it doesn't make a difference whether it was male or female. They were all held the same position in the Hebrew world. They aren't elevated to some god-like status as perfect, innocent, or cute as they are in America. They were considered useless or rather dependent. If a child were hungry they don't run off to the store to go buy bread, they ask mom. They depended on the will of their father. Then ancients practice abortion and exposure. Children were set out to the elements to die and or they were sacrificed to the pagan gods. But in Hebrew and Christian circles children participated in the religious rites. Jesus positions a child before them and says, "*This is greatness in the kingdom of God.*" The child, not their virtue, is held up as an example of imitation.

It's in the exact opposite direction the disciples expected. It's not a competition to see who is the greatest. It's dependency. It's not that children are sinless. The only reason an infant is so cute is because they lack the ability to act upon what they are thinking. This is the status of a child who possesses nothing but needs everything. These ones are great and are under special protection by the Father in heaven.

There are severe consequences for getting a competition for greatness wrong. You will not enter the kingdom of God. If you hinder one of these little ones, "*it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea.*" And this isn't the little millstone, this is the big one turned by donkeys. *If your hand or your foot causes you to fall away, 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 be thrown into the eternal fire.* Getting this great lesson right is of extreme importance.

Getting this lesson right is a matter of life and limb. The consequences are great. But the church has never practiced amputation in any of its religious services. And if we did, this might lead to another reason for us to boast about our faithfulness. When you are concerned about who is the greatest, any good activity can be misunderstood and misused. Worship and bible study attendance become a way of defining one's status in a congregation, and not about hearing God's Word and receiving the Sacrament. Even something as simple as how one dresses or worships can become more about the person than worship.

There are times and places in this world where questions about greatness are out of place, and the Church is one of them. That would be like arguing who is the greatest in the local homeless shelter. We're all in sad shape. We come to church not to celebrate success but to deny self – confess our failures, but certainly not for status. Jesus points us not to greatness but service to the little ones. Rather than minimize ourselves we'll minimize our sin by comparing ourselves with others. If they can get away with it, why can't we? If they're not so bad, then I'm okay too.

This is where our lesson takes another turn towards lopping off body parts and gouging out eyes. Chrysostom an early church father around 350 AD took the removal of limbs as excommunication from the church, the body of Christ. Rather than have the offense of one become the practice of all, it would be better to remove the offending limb from the community than have the whole body head to hell. And that's what happens when we minimize sin by comparing ourselves to others. That's what happens when we offer up excuse after excuse for sin. Imagine an apology was, "I'm sorry I left you but your mother was impossible to deal with. This is all her fault." Imagine if the apology was demanded and driven by guilt, "Jesus says, you must forgive me or you won't be forgiven." This is what happens when we make ourselves great and our sin small. It's never our fault. We're victims. They did this to me. I have an excuse. My eye did it. And if that's the case gouge it out because you are responsible for your body. There are no excuses.

The sinner should be concerned. We deserve to be cut out of the church, with a millstone tied around our neck, and thrown into the depths of the sea – where there is no escape from the millstones weight, where we can't find our way back to the fold because we are lost. Our sin is great, but our God is greater.

Our works do not qualify us before God but the actions of Jesus do. The greatest in the kingdom of God is the one who serves the “little ones.” Who goes on a search and rescue for the lost in order to save. This is the great one.

Look how seriously Jesus deals with sin. He goes through danger and death to save us from the depths of the ocean. He is the good shepherd who comes looking for us to find us and save us. “*The Son of man came to seek and save the lost.*” That’s us. We’re the little ones. Jesus – for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became fully human. Jesus, God’s Son, came down from heaven, the great one, wasn’t thinking about positions of power and authority but he took on the lowest, the most despised position, he took up our sin and went the way of the cross.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, sought out the lost sheep. And we are that one sheep out of 99. Jesus took our place when it came to the millstone. He is cast into the depths of God's wrath for our sin, only to rise from the tomb on Easter morning. Jesus is the one who cut off not hand or gouged out an eye, but cut off his life from the land of the living. He was broken and bloodied as a sacrifice for sin. And he gives us that same body and blood to sustain our faith so that we are never cut off from God's grace. What he did was great for little ones like us.

What’s even more amazing is his care and compassion for the little ones. Not only do I think this refers to children in Christ but even more specifically, “Little ones,” all of us. And Jesus says of them, “*their angels always behold the face of the Father*” (Matthew 18:10). In Isaiah 6:2 the seraphim that serve the LORD cover their eyes with a set of wings, and their feet with another set. But the angels of the little ones always behold the face of the father. They’re special. They’re unique. They’re protected. Little ones struggle, suffer, attempt suicide, are ignored, are those so quickly removed from the church.

But they are great in God’s kingdom. These words are written not as a method to remove members. I know this lesson is used for church discipline but the point isn’t punishment it’s restoration. We serve the little ones and we are great by bringing back those who have gone astray, those who are already lost.

When your brother sins against you, do you cancel them, cut them off, and quite talking to them? Do you make them great by spreading rumors of their sin to one and all? Do you, Do unto them as they have done to you. No. We recall what Christ has done for us. We seek reconciliation. We seek sinners just as Christ has sought us, how he placed his name on us in baptism, how he comes to us weekly, even daily and fully forgives all our sin. You aren’t cut off. You are restored to live a new and holy life. You might not be great but your sin was. But that great sin has been forgiven by your great God. and the great thing about that is we have God’s great promise, “*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” That means when a Christian forgives another Christian it is as sure and certain as if Christ did it himself. Your sins are forgiven, cut off from you, drowned in the depths of the sea.

Maybe it’s been a struggle of a week. There is so much with this lesson. It’s great. It’s big. It’s a response to a great big dumb question. But let’s not don’t be too hard on the disciples. How would you like it if you’re great failures were recorded for future generations to read again and again. We’re not great but our God is and look at all the great things he has done for you. Amen.