

“ACT LIKE A CHILD”

The Gospel Lesson (Matthew 18: 1-20) for this Sunday, September 10th may seem at first glance to be really disjointed; talking about children, cutting off our hand or foot, sheep wandering away, and confronting others about their sins. What’s the common topic or thread? Each section can be seen as a distinct topic: the greatest in the kingdom (v. 1-6), when temptations come (v. 7-9), the lost sheep (v. 10-14) , and what is bound on earth is bound in heaven (v. 15-20); however, the whole of chapter 18 is Jesus’ teachings on overturning misunderstandings about the kingdom. We read the first half of Matthew 18 this Sunday and the Gospel lesson (Matthew 18: 21-35) for next Sunday will complete the chapter.

Matthew 18 begins with a key question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” It is the one who “humbles himself like this child,” a needy and dependent individual. Note the accent on faith in verse 6, “little ones who believe in me.” How important could such a person be? A “little one” should be received in Jesus’s name, as if Jesus were that person. What behavior should one exhibit in this receiving? No one should cause such a child to sin, but the world will provide temptations, and woe to the one by whom they come. To wound the one for whom Christ died is to sin against Christ. How precious is this “little one”? No “little one” is to be despised or looked down upon. Any shepherd rejoices over one stray sheep who wanders from the flock and is brought back, and so the Father rejoices over this one “more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.” Not one should be allowed to perish. How do you deal with a brother who sins against you—who strays? You tell him his fault, and if he listens, he is gained—even if this process of confronting the sin and listening to two or three witnesses or to the church is needed to gain him back. In the event that he won’t listen, let him be considered as one who is outside the kingdom (as a Gentile and a tax collector); he can no longer be treated as a “little one.”

This sequence of thought in these four topics has a unity. The “child” who believes is the most precious (greatest) in the kingdom of heaven, should not be led into sin, should be found when he strays, and should be led back “by listening.” That listening is to hear again that Jesus is the Savior and has rescued all from the power of sin. Our Father rejoices over a sinner who repents and returns to the fold. What holds these sections together can be seen in verse 5 (“whoever receives one such child *in my name* receives me”) and verse 20 (“where two or three are gathered *in my name*, there am I among them”). Jesus is one with the believer and is among believers who gather “in His name.” He continually cares for—protects, returns and restores—each one.

What is revealed in Matthew chapter 18, is how to take care of the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, namely, the dependent and needy “child” of the heavenly Father. Truly, we are all dependents (children) of our heavenly Father. Matthew 18 provides practical examples of what it means for the Christian community to live as salt of the earth and light of the world. Loving and protecting those whom society ignores, searching for the lost sheep who have lost their way, forgiving, practicing mercy—this is the way of Jesus. This is the way of the cross. We often fail to process Jesus’ teachings because our own concerns drown them out. We worry that our churches are too empty and that the Church in the U.S. has lost too much power. Yet Jesus’ words show that we are paying attention to the wrong things. The greatest in the kingdom of heaven are not those with the largest buildings, the highest average Sunday attendance, and the biggest budgets. The greatest in God’s reign are those who know how little is under their control, and who focus on loving and serving those in need instead of promoting themselves. Today, in this time and place in our lives, Jesus invites us to become like little children, trusting in God and following Jesus in the humbleness of love.

COME AND WORSHIP THIS SUNDAY

10 AM

COFFEE FELLOWSHIP FOLLOWING THE SERVICE