

# 14th Sunday After PENTECOST



## Prayers

Gracious Father, through the waters of Holy Baptism, You made us citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Keep all the baptized in Your grace until the day Your Son returns to usher in the fullness of His kingdom. Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

(Proper 18)

### Collect of the Day

O God, from whom all good proceeds, grant to us, Your humble servants, Your holy inspiration, that we may set our minds on the things that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Gracious Father, because You do not desire the death of sinners but that they should turn from their evil ways and receive life, Your Son has sent preachers as watchmen to warn us of Your wrath and to proclaim Your word of forgiveness. Grant strength to all pastors that they would carry out their holy calling according to Your Word. And teach us to obey our leaders and submit to them as those who keep watch over our souls and who must give an account. Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

Gracious Father, You give leaders to every nation and people. Grant to us in this nation good and wise public servants that they would bear the sword righteously, defending the innocent and punishing wrongdoers. Protect those who work to protect us, especially all in the armed forces, the police and our firefighters. Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

### Scripture Readings

Psalm 32:1-7  
(antiphon v. 1)  
Ezekiel 33:7-9  
Romans 13:1-10  
Matthew 18:1-20

Gracious Father, You send rain on the thankful and the unthankful. Provide daily bread to all people, especially to those who struggle to provide for themselves and their families. Give honest and faithful labor to the unemployed and the underemployed. Bless those who maintain the industries and service sectors of our land and give them a right regard for their labours that they may find joy in serving You and in supplying our needs. Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

### Hymns

Hymn of the Day – 820  
Other Hymns – 579 (OT, E), 965 (E), 966(E), 707 (G), 864 (G), 866 (G), 902 (G)

Gracious Father, look with favour on the schools, colleges, and universities in our nation, blessing those who teach and those who learn, that they may grow in all useful knowledge and so be a blessing to all Your people. Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

Gracious Father, You lay crosses upon us to teach us humility and dependence on You. Abide with those who are sick or suffering in any way; remember [especially \_\_\_\_\_] and all for whom we pray in our hearts. Alleviate their suffering, heal their sickness, and teach us to rely only on You in times of plenty and in times of suffering. Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

# SEASON AFTER PENTECOST SERMON

## FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST SEPTEMBER 6 2020

**Sermon Text: Matthew 18:1-20**

*'The Neediest is the Greatest'*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose kingdom the neediest is the greatest. Amen.

The sermon text for today is from the Gospel reading, particularly Matthew 18:1-5, which reads:

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and 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. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.’”

Jesus continues to teach His disciples and each of us. Last week we heard in the Gospel reading from Matthew 16, “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Peter and the disciples didn't respond well to the Lord's teaching. They are more than thrilled that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Yet a suffering Messiah is a big problem. But Jesus puts Peter and the others back in place following him, denying the things of men, and taking up the cross, “the things of God.”

Then in Matthew 17:22 Jesus proclaims for the second time the end goal of His ministry saying to the disciples once more, “‘The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.’ And they were greatly distressed.” Then a few verses after arriving in Capernaum, their home base for ministry in Galilee, and discussion about the

temple tax, the Gospel reading for today from Matthew 18:1 reports: “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’”

The disciples’ response to being freed as sons of the Father through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ was not to rebuke Jesus this time as in chapter 16. I suppose that’s a bit of an improvement. Instead of telling Jesus not to take away the sin of the world through suffering, the disciples, as sons in the Father’s kingdom ask selfishly, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

In Matthew 16 the disciples don’t understand Jesus. In Matthew 18 it is clear they don’t understand themselves. This time their misguided question shows they still have in mind the “things of man”, worldly success, and being the greatest. Now Jesus must continue to teach them and also us the “things of God” and especially being the “greatest” in God’s kingdom.

Matthew 18:2 tells us, “And calling to him a child, [Jesus] put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly I say to you, unless you turn and 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.’”

Finally, our Lord shows us what greatness is all about. It’s not about being high and mighty, the most successful, the best. Greatness is this little one, being humble like a child, trusting and believing, and having faith like a child. Wrong!

To be sure Christ sets a child in the disciples’ midst to display greatness saying, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the great in the kingdom of heaven,” but it has nothing to do with how humble, trusting, and believing children are. Sure children can serve humbly. But they can also be just as much if not more selfish and self-serving. Kids believe what their parents tell them a lot of times, but how many children have said rather than trusting what their parents have told them that they have to find out for themselves if the Bible is true. Or when older they may even ask if this Jesus thing has any truth to it.

In fact, in ancient times, children were never an example for adults. Jeff Gibbs writes in his commentary, “Children rarely, if ever, served as role models for adults in the sense that they were thought to possess positive qualities that adults should seek to emulate” (890). Even today as then, children may be praised for the potential to become something great in the future, but as young ones they aren’t people to emulate.

What's more in Matthew's Gospel children are "portrayed in a negative fashion, or more commonly, as essentially dependent upon others and unable to provide for themselves." Jesus Himself in Matthew 2 as a child must totally rely on Joseph to escape to Egypt to escape the murderous wiles of King Herod.

No, in Matthew 18 Jesus brings a child before the disciples not because of any particular remarkable quality of children, but rather to show how completely children are dependent upon those who care for them. Rather than acting humbly, children simply are humble because of their position in the family, in the world, and in life generally.

Herein lies the greatness of being like children—their need is the greatest. They can't provide anything for themselves and must depend utterly upon those who care for them. In other words, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the neediest.

Jesus should know. He was born into the neediness of humanity dependent on his mother and her husband for his livelihood and wellbeing until He stretched out His arms finally bearing all of human need upon the cross from which He could only pray, "Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit."

Gibbs notes once more, "The greatest and most important disciple is the one who is the weakest, the most humble and lowly, the most dependent on God, the most reliant on Jesus...In the difficult life of discipleship and cross-bearing, there are times and situations in which certain disciples will be especially beaten down by sin and evil and Satan, and they find themselves in a time of dire need. These are the little ones who are the greatest" (901-2).

Dear children of God, little ones of the Father, in your darkest, deepest need where you have no way, except Jesus and His death and life for you, there, just there, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

When your family is disjointed and torn apart, when your marriage once stable seems to be slipping away, when your children are pushing back until it feels you can no longer reach them, when your parents are full of anger and distant and no longer care, when your body doesn't want to keep going, when your loved ones are fading and fast, when horrid memories attack unrelentingly, when your past constantly comes back to haunt you...

When you can never put down the bottle, when you are forgotten by everyone and don't know if you will make it through the week, when you can't rescue oth-

ers from their vicious cycles, when it seems all you have are a gravestone and a few photos, when you have no more strength, when you have nothing to give and you need everything, don't try harder.

Confess your every need and your inability to solve or to escape your problems. Remember your baptism, where you could do nothing for yourself and the Lord gave you everything, and you became the greatest in the kingdom of God. Indeed, Christ proclaims, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

Gladly kneel before your Father as the neediest beggar with empty hands and receive from His Son's outstretched arms the greatest gift imaginable, Christ's body and blood that cares for all of your needs. And never, ever grow out of your complete dependence upon the Father's love to care for your every need.

St. Paul promises in 2 Corinthians 12 saying, "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

In the kingdom of heaven, in the active reign of God, your surpassing needs are always met in the only way possible—the Son of God takes on all your needs dying and rising forever for you. Each day in your great need recall with Peter every day saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Our Lord not only rejoices to hear the young ones but all of his little children from 1 to 100+ sing, "Little children come to me, for My kingdom is for these... Children of the Heav'nly Father, safely in His bosom gather...God's own child I'll gladly say it, 'I am baptized into Christ.'"

You see, the greatest in our community are not the municipal and business leaders, but rather those on the farthest fringes and in the greatest need—the homeless, the marginalized, the unborn, the young children, the aged, the sick, and the weak. The greatest in our families are not the ones we love the most, but the ones we can hardly stand to be around, who always seem to cause trouble and bring nothing but pain and sorrow.

The greatest in this congregation are not those who serve as pastor or in elected positions, but rather those who don't seem to yet understand that Christ actually provides everything and we can do nothing, those who can rarely come because they are so dismembered by their own pain or sin, and those who are walking off the street having tried everything else with nowhere to go.

This isn't self-pity, a licence to inflict hurt on others, or a right to demand help in our need. No, this is simply the graciousness of our heavenly Father. This is a dependence we have upon Him that will only end when Christ returns to put an end to our needs forever. Until that day this is simply how the kingdom of God works, where the neediest is the greatest.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.