

Bishop Paull Spring, Founding Bishop of the NALC
18th Sunday after Pentecost -September 27, 2015
Immanuel, New York City
Mark 9:38-50

“If any one 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 hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” (Mark 9:42)

I want to thank you for the opportunity to be with you today in worship. It’s been several years since I have visited the “big apple,” an odd name for New York City. In recent years my closest connection to Manhattan has been watching the national news and watching “Blue Bloods” on television — one of my favorite television programs.

I bring you greetings from the four hundred congregations in the North American Lutheran Church and from our bishop, John Bradosky, who was with you several months ago.

I want to commend you for your ministry here in this place, going back to the 1860s. I also want to commend you for your present ministry in New York City. I am sure it is a challenging and demanding ministry for you — proclaiming Christ as Savior in this urban, multicultural context.

I also want to commend you for the serious and careful attention you are giving to your relationship with the church at large. I thank your fine pastor and congregational leaders for all their efforts in what is not an easy decision for you to make. I look forward to our discussion and conversation after worship today and pray God’s blessings on your decision.

For now, however, we want to focus ourselves on the Word of God, on the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel, serious words they are. “If any one of you put a stumbling block before one these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

Many, many years ago I was in Uppsala, Sweden and attended a service of thanksgiving in Uppsala Cathedral for the eight hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Swedish Christianity. The service was extraordinarily festive, and people filled the cathedral to overflowing. My friends and I barely found a place in a side chapel where we could barely see anything up front. At the beginning of this service there was a grand procession of Christian leaders from all over the world — bishops and clergy, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, from the World

Council of Churches, a veritable who's who of Christian leaders from all over. Once this procession was completed, there was a fanfare of trumpets, the choir began to sing, and the organ began to peal forth. Everyone stood up, and I was on tip toe to see what was happening. I whispered to the person next to me, "What's going on?" "The king and queen of Sweden and the royal family are entering the church." I said to myself, We had been sitting as the representatives from the various churches were coming in, but we had to stand when the king and queen made their appearance. It was clear to me, who were the important people in the church that day.

Some years later, after I was ordained, I visited a Lutheran church in Warren County, Pennsylvania. It was a church that had been formed by Swedish settlers in the 19th century. As I looked about the church, everything looked pretty normal and in place — altar, pulpit, font, and lectern. But off to the side next to the altar there was this large, upholstered chair with a rope around it. I had never seen a chair roped off in a church before. So I asked what this was. Well, this was the chair where the king of Sweden sat when he had visited the community some years ago. No one was permitted to sit in this chair, I was told solemnly. The king had sat there.

In the 1950s Dwight Eisenhower was running for President. Part of his campaign tour was a stop in my hometown of Wheeling, West Virginia. My father and I went to the railroad station. Eisenhower came out and began shaking hands with the crowd. Somehow I forced myself to the front, put out my hand, and Eisenhower shook it. That made my day, I'll tell you. When I told my friends that I had shaken hands with Eisenhower, they told me not to wash my hand for three days.

Now, that's the way it is in the world, isn't it. We honor the high and the mighty, the movers and the shakers — political leaders, generals and admirals, celebrities, and opinion makers.

How different things are with Jesus. The apostle Peter had it right, when he said, "God shows no partiality." So it was that Jesus came and ate with tax collectors and sinners. He talked with women. He touched lepers and healed them. He told stories about Samaritans and prodigal sons. When he was born, it was in tiny Bethlehem, and he grew up in Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" they said. His disciples were very ordinary people, not a prince among them, nor a religious leader either.

For Jesus the people he singles out are the meek. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the marginalized. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

In the Gospels the disciples were disputing with one another over which one of them would be counted as great in the kingdom of God. Jesus put them all in their place, “Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all” Then he put a little child in the center of the disciples and went even further, “If any one 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 hung around your neck.”

In the Gospels some children were making a fuss and disturbing the crowd, and the disciples wanted Jesus to dismiss the children. “Let the children come to me,” said Jesus, “for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” When a crowd of five thousand were without food, it was a small boy who came forward with five loaves of bread and two fish.

My wife and I were on vacation at Chautauqua Institution in western New York. On Sunday we went to church at a nearby congregation. But this was going to be a special Sunday for me, because this Sunday we would have our granddaughter with us, three years old at the time. This would be a special Sunday. On other Sundays I would be up front in the pulpit or at the altar. But this Sunday I could sit with our granddaughter. But as soon as we entered the entrance area, an usher came up to us, “You’re not going to bring that little child in with you, are you?” I was shocked. “Of course we will; she’ll sit with us.” “Well, we have a nursery here and you should really leave her there.” I held my ground; “Allie will sit with us,” I said. The usher wouldn’t give up. He urged us to sit toward the front on the right hand side near the door. “If she does make some noise, then you’ll be close to the door, and you can easily take her out.”

Over against this are the words of Jesus of Nazareth, “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 hung around your neck.”

It is Jesus’ style, as it were. Putting down the high and the mighty and raising up the lowly. He brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. It is his way of life, and it is a good way, because it bears with it good news indeed.

It is good news for all people, including children, children who believe in him. We build walls and live in gated communities. We live in communities that are segregated by distinctions and differences. We speak of the haves and the have nots. There are people whom we so easily dismiss as the undesirables.

Jesus is for all people, including children, children who believe in him.

When I was elected a bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I walked in on a committee meeting that was already in process. Everyone stopped

what they were discussing and they stood up as one. Jesus' way is to place a child in the center of the circle. "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself," he said. That horizontal beam of the cross that reaches out to all who believe in him, including children.

For we are the children, the children who believe in him. That's who we are, aren't we? We are the children who believe in Jesus. We are children who have received the precious gift of faith. We've heard his voice calling out to us, "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." We hold on to him with all the strength he gives us, because he promises to protect us.

In the apartment building where my wife and I live we are the only people who go to church on Sunday. But we keep at it; we keep on going because God has made us his children, and because we believe in him. We hold onto him for dear life. We trust him implicitly, and we follow him as his children, dependent on him for all things as children are; we believe in him as children do. We have this child-like faith, a faith given to us by God, a faith that says, "You, Jesus, are Savior and Lord; you, Jesus, are life itself; you, Jesus, are hope, joy, and salvation."

This is the Jesus whom we honor and serve. Others may honor the high and the mighty; they stand when kings and bishops enter the room. But when Jesus enters the room, we kneel down in awe and devotion. This God in the flesh. This word of God that now has come to us as a human. So human that he died in our midst for us and for our salvation, only to rise again three days later. But before that, he came among us as one of us. This heavenly mighty God who humbled himself and emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, identifying himself with us, one on one.

This child of Bethlehem, crucified as a common criminal. Surrounded by followers who were anything but the high and the mighty. "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." Paul was writing here of the first Christians. But he could just as easily have been speaking about Jesus, God's child in our midst. He same as an outsider, a no count, to be God's word for us and for all who believe in him.

Still he comes to us in the most simple and childlike ways. In the preaching of his word, and he says to us, "I am for you and for all who believe." In the water, and he says to us, "I give you new life and a rebirth." In the bread and the wine, and he says to us, "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

In our text we hear the voice of our Savior, "If anyone of you put a stumbling block before one to these little ones who believe in me, it would be better if a great millstone were hung around your neck." How protective Jesus is for the children who believe in him. Not everyone believes in him, and not only children, but a

growing number of people today of all ages. They are like sheep without a shepherd, like children without their parents.

Let us, therefore, thank God that we can call him Father from the heart. “Our Father who art in heaven.” “Here God encourages us to believe that he is truly our Father, and we are truly his children,” it says in the catechism. And let us thank God that he has given us his own Son, his own child, to protect us, to lead us, and ultimately to forgive us and give us newness of life.