

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, April 17, 2024
Matthew 18:1-9

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 18:1-9, RSV
Last week we read of Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection, as he had also done in Matthew 16. Also we read of the temple tax. Now we read some of his saying concerning children and his warnings about being the cause of temptation for others.

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, ³and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; ⁶but 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 round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

⁷“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes! ⁸And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”

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

Two times recently we have heard our Lord Jesus predict his suffering and resurrection. He did so in Chapter 16 and in Chapter 17. The first time, Peter was appalled at the idea that Jesus should suffer rejection and death. He exclaimed, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22). Peter then received a stern rebuke from Jesus for being on the side of men, rather than on the side of God.

But the response of the disciples to the second, more recent Passion prediction in Chapter 17 is quite different. St. Matthew reports that the disciples were greatly distressed at the words of Jesus, but we hear nothing of what they say. As far we know, they were silent that time.

Now, in this next Chapter, Chapter 18, it is as if the disciples have been pondering the two past Passion predictions and are ready to speak. But this time, they have rather gotten the other end of the stick. Now, they seem to bypass the suffering and death of their Master and instead they are thinking

about the second part of the Passion predictions — the words about Jesus being raised on the third day. They would be right in thinking that the resurrection of Jesus vindicates Jesus and confirms that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

So, they have their question about that Kingdom. It is a question about the “greatest”:

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1, RSV)

The great English Bible commentator from the 1700s Matthew Henry (1662 – 1714) imagined the thinking of the disciples:

Peter was always the chief speaker, and already had the keys given him; he expects to be lord-chancellor, or lord-chamberlain of the household, and so to be the greatest. Judas had the bag, and therefore he expects to be lord-treasurer... John is the beloved disciple, the favourite of the Prince, and therefore hopes to be the greatest. Andrew was first called, and why should not he be first preferred?

It does seem that the Twelve are thinking in terms of glory and prestige in the coming Kingdom of God.

But Jesus thinks in terms of humility — in particular, the humility of children. For a good while as they are growing up, children are innocent and artless. They do not seem to scheme to get the possessions of others. They do not seem to envy. If the parents do not object, a poor child will play happily with a rich child, and the rich one with the poor one. They are not prejudiced. The color of the skin of their playmates does not seem to matter to a child. And children seem able to trust that they do not have to take care of themselves, but that other, bigger people will take care of them. At least, we can fervently pray that children can have such trust — that their reality has not taken that trust out of them.

So, there are comparisons for adult Christians. It seems that Jesus would like us too to be innocent and artless. It might not make us great in this world, but it will make us great in the Kingdom which is eternal. So, no cruel manipulation of others for us. No scheming for us to take unfair advantage of others. If we are prone to prejudice, we should leave it off, striving to be more fair with people. And no cynicism for us. We should have a fundamental trust in God’s world. Others might think us naïve. But we have a right to think that all will be well, in the end. Our job is to work away with integrity day by day.

It is the Lord's job and the Lord's joy to see to the big questions of salvation and heaven.

But being childlike in this fallen world leaves us vulnerable to those who would hurt us. Jesus warns them not to do it. Indeed, he warns them with dreadful words:

...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 round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6, RSV)

These words should ring in the hearts of every pastor, every attorney, every physician, and every human being who is in the position to harm or to mislead God's little ones on earth — not just the children, but innocent adults who are doing their good work on earth and trusting the rest to God. Tremble before such a one. Do not think that children and child-like Christians are no accounts, worthy of being ripped off or misled into sin. To do that is to play with fire. Indeed, to abuse Christ's little ones on earth is play with hellfire!

Jesus cares about our eternal souls. That is pretty clear from his closing words in this evening's reading:

⁸And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. (Matthew 18:8, RSV)

It is hard to imagine the matter being more serious than this. Before, Jesus was cautioning those who would hurt his little ones to not do it. Now he is cautioning us that if our own bodies would lead us astray, we had best get them under control.

This language is pretty violent... this cutting off of the hand and the plucking out of the eye. But I suggest that we should read it as an expression of Christ's love for each of — an almost desperate love that worries more for our souls than perhaps we do ourselves. And in the end, this is what we have — the earnest love of Jesus for us. And in that, we can abide, staying as close to Jesus as we can, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.