

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, April 24, 2024
Matthew 18:10-20

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 18:10-20, NRSV
Last week we read some of the sayings of Jesus concerning children. Also we read his warnings about being the cause of temptation for others. Now we read of the “little ones,” of the one lost sheep, and of grievances in the church.

Before the Gospel:

☞ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Eighteenth Chapter:

☛ **Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said] ¹⁰“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. ¹¹ ¹²What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

¹⁵“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

After the Gospel:

☞ The Gospel of the Lord.

☛ **Praise to you, O Christ.**

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

This evening’s reading begins with an intriguing verse. It speaks of angels:

[Jesus said] ¹⁰Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels

continually see the face of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 18:10, NRSV)

That means that the angels of the little ones are in the presence of God. The Lord is informed *always* about the wellbeing of his little ones. So, let us give good care to the little ones.

I think it best that when our text speaks of the “little ones,” we should think that Jesus means both children and child-like grown-up Christians. That would be true also for the preceding words about the millstone:

⁶...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)

Compared to our Maker all of us are “little ones.” Yet, among us humans, we are tempted to make distinctions, lording it over simple brothers and sisters who have little power or little charm. Do not do it, Jesus says. Do not hurt or mislead the little ones, whether they be wee children or grown up Christians.

It is a great sadness of this fallen world that there are “little ones” all over the world — not just in the Church, but everywhere. We can think, for example, of people who have been driven from their homes by war and tribal conflict, who have lost everything, and now live in refugee camps. In this sermon, I aim to deal with little ones in the Church, but the other cases are important too. I hope someday to try to deal with them in a sermon on the poor man Lazarus who lay at the rich man’s gate (Luke 16).

Here, let’s consider the two cases in the Church — the wee children and then the grown up Christians.

About the little children, Jesus seems to love them not simply as potential adults, but as they are, as little ones. I spoke last week about the innocence and the artlessness of children. Jesus seemed to like children for those reasons. I have read that in that ancient society, children were kept in the background, as if they are “better seen than heard.” And so we have the story of the Twelve trying to shelter Jesus from the children. But Jesus would not have that:

¹⁵Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:15-17, RSV)

Parents and preachers and bishops and Sunday School teachers follow Jesus in their affection for the little ones. So, they should be careful to not despise or hurt or mislead the children. Remember, the angels of the children are always before the face of God.

Now, let's shift to grown-up childlike Christians. Our text leads me to think of three cases: (1) The adult Christian who is made to feel unimportant. (2) The adult Christian who has strayed away from the faith of the Church. And (3) The adult Christian who has made *himself* or *herself* little by way of wrong-doing.

First, the adult Christian who does not feel valued — not even in the Church. A commentator on this text — Bible scholar Douglas Hare — mentioned a Brooklyn preacher who went to talk with a lapsed member. Professor Hare wrote this:

Most modern congregations surely deserve the sharp warning of verses 10-14 as much as Matthew's. How easy it is for the active members of a church to ignore those who play no leadership role and contribute only modestly to the budget! A Brooklyn minister, visiting one of his inactive members, was told, "Those people over at the church make me feel like a nobody." How many thousands of others there are whose experience has been the same!¹

The professor concludes that Jesus must weep at our continuing disdain for the little ones of his flock. The angels even of grown Christians are continually before the face of God. So let us value those the world often overlooks.

Second, the little ones include Christians who have strayed from the faith of the church. Jesus says that the Good Shepherd goes off in search of them.

Why did they stray? Well, three explanations come to mind. One group of straying sheep might be like the fellow in Douglas Hare's story. They stopped coming to church because they felt that no one would miss them. They felt that no one cared whether they came to church or not, and so they stopped coming.

Another group strayed simply because they lost the good habit of going to church and developed other habits that led them away bit by bit from Jesus. Last Sunday we met in the Martin Luther Room because some debris had fallen into our chancel. I told people in advance that we would not worship in our church but would live stream the service from the Martin Luther Room. I figured it would be just Jeff Rudat and me in the Martin Luther Room. Jeff was there to live stream the service and to serve as Lector. But it was not just Jeff

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation Commentary (John Knox Press: Louisville, copyright 1993), page 212.

and me. I bet we had thirty people in this room and in the hallway and in my Pastor's Office. They came to church because they had the good habit of coming to church. That is what they do on Sunday morning. They have their breakfast, put on their Sunday clothes, and off they go to church. But it is possible to get out of that good habit. Let us be careful with our habits, lest we end up straying from Jesus.

And the third group of straying sheep were misled. They were led away from the church. Incompetent shepherds beckoned to them. They listened and followed the incompetent shepherd for a while, but in the end, they asked themselves the question, "What is the point? I can get this by staying home and reading the newspaper." That is, if the church should conform itself to the world, so that it no longer offers a holy alternative to the world, it is no wonder that some of the sheep should go straying. The Good Shepherd will try to fetch them back. At least, a good pastor will try to be faithful to Jesus, so that people do not stray from a church that seems to them indistinguishable from the world.

So far, we have looked at two groups of grown-up little ones. They are grown ups, but they are the kind of people our Maker worries about. One group strayed because they felt like nobodies in the church. Another group strayed because they got out of the habit or they were misled.

Now, let's consider a third group of grown-up little ones. These are Christians who have diminished themselves by way of wrongdoing. In Matthew 18, Jesus gives a procedure for the reconciliation of aggrieved persons in the Church. The thing I like about the procedure is how gentle and hopeful it is toward the wrongdoer. If someone in the Church has wronged us, Jesus wants us to go to that person privately and try to sort things out. The private nature of the conversation helps preserve the reputation of the wrongdoer. If the wrongdoer is stubborn and refuses to repent, then the procedure slowly becomes more public, but it never reaches the stage of hating the wrongdoer. At its worst, our Lord's procedure results in the church considering the wrongdoer to be "to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." That's not so bad. After all, Jesus was renowned for loving tax collectors and sinners and Samaritans. He does not want to give up on them. They might have made themselves to be little ones but Jesus likes the little ones.

I close by repeating an earlier point: Compared to God, *all of us* are little ones. Even the best and brightest of us are but small potatoes compared to our Maker. And yet our Maker loves us. As a race, we humans might be insignificant compared to God, and within our race, some are impressive and some are humble, some are good and some are bad. But the Good Shepherd loves them all and yearns for them all to draw closer to him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.