

Matthew 18:1-6, 10-14

18At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’²He called a child, whom he put among them,³and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

6 ‘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 fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

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.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.

Holy Spirit of God, shine your light upon this Word and into our hearts that we may be newly empowered to spread forth your love into our world. Amen.

Is there status in the kingdom of heaven? Is there a pecking order in the realm of God? It seems like the disciples thought so, for they asked Jesus who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? I bet they weren’t prepared for Jesus’ answer. I’m not sure *we* are prepared for Jesus’ answer! Are we even able to hear Jesus’ response to his disciple’s question? And if can, are we willing to take it seriously?

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Let’s hear again how Jesus responded: “Unless you change...and become like children...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” I must confess I don’t think I’ve ever taken this passage fully to heart.

Unless we change and become like children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. I think of Nicodemus wondering how he’ll get back into his mother’s womb so he can be born again! But the “cat is definitely out of the bag,” we can’t get the toothpaste back into the tube,” how are we to go back to being like children after our innocence has been lost and we have been tarnished by the ways of the world? How can we go back?

In truth we can’t go back; the balloon of innocence has popped. We can only go forward and hope to complete the circle, arriving at the place we started and seeing it again as if for the first time. As mature adults, can we see what Jesus is asking of us?

Jesus certainly had a special place in his heart for children. Besides this story, the next chapter of Matthew recounts another encounter between Jesus and little children. There the disciples try to shoo them away, but Jesus wouldn’t have it; “let them come,” he said, “to such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:13-15). These stories represent a strong tradition in all of the first three gospels.

Jesus is serious; he is serious about us becoming like children, that is, putting on the innocence of children, the wonder of children, to be as trusting as children, as curious as children, and to be as eager and free as children to follow our Savior. How on earth are we to do this though, with all the responsibilities and commitments we have? ...to work and school, committees and boards, extracurricular activities and organizations...did I mention sports and hobbies?

Unless we become like children so that we can recognize the child in *every* person, we cannot even see the kingdom of heaven, let alone enter it. We are all children of God; the pompous one, the thief, the monk, the homeless, the CEO, the panhandler; gay or straight, captive or free, we are all children of God.

We are all children of God, and that is why we baptize...for we are baptized into the body of Christ; and we confess that the body of Christ is us! When we baptize we make vows as we did this morning with Kristina and Mikayla; we promise to love them, we promise to support them, and we promise to care for them. These are not just words! You and I, we are the flesh of those words; love made flesh, support made flesh, caring embodied in living flesh.

This is also what is happening upstairs in the Revolving Closet; Emily, Holly, the North Country Cares board and their volunteers are giving flesh to their love for the less advantaged teens of the Valley. They are reaching out to teens who have been in some ways despised, discounted, neglected, forgotten, and they are making a real difference for them. To such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

A while back the question, “What would Jesus do?” became quite popular. WWJD bracelets and t-shirts started showing up everywhere. It was a good question to ask when we found ourselves in a tricky spot, or were confronted with a moral dilemma. WWJD?

But I don’t think WWJD went far enough. The question, “What would Jesus do?” begs an answer, but what if our response was just lip service? Or worse, what if we were so sure we knew what Jesus would do, that our answer to the question came off as self-righteous moralizing; judgment offered from the comfort of the sidelines. I think we need to go deeper.

What if we changed the question just a little and asked ourselves: **What would Jesus want us to do?** What if we understood that Jesus’ wanted us to get some skin in the game?

When we baptize, we are called to have some skin in the game, so that our love and support and care take on flesh. The stories we heard this morning from the Revolving Closet ministry are a witness to grace of genuine love and compassion. And when it’s genuine, to such belong the kingdom of heaven, and thus the kingdom of heaven becomes visible; visible in you and me.

CHRIST HAS NO BODY

Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands,

yours are the feet,

yours are the eyes,

you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

— St. Teresa of Ávila
1515 - 1582