



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“Lest We Offend a Little One”

Scripture Lessons: *Psalm 1, Matthew 18:1-6*

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday,
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Charleston, South Carolina.*

Matthew 18: 1-6

True Greatness

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

Temptations to Sin

‘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.

Anticipating this morning’s service of worship...and our children’s choirs singing...and the celebration of not one but two infant baptisms – it got me thinking about God’s love for our children!

God’s gracious invitation in Jesus Christ our Lord that we bring them unto him / that we forbid them not...for such is the kingdom of God!

For Jesus to draw near to children is more significant than we may realize, because in Jesus’ day children had no rights...they had no real place or stature in everyday life...they were at the periphery of things...they were marginalized.

And for Jesus to invite them was to say that all people were important to Jesus. Not just the adults...not just people of rank and station...not just those people who could return favors.

Not surprisingly, Jesus spent most of his time with adults, and when we come to this morning’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel, these adults who have been following Jesus for the last three years -- they have been privy to some very important aspects of Jesus’ life.

For example, they have already seen how Jesus celebrated Peter’s affirmation of his identity / that occasion when Jesus had asked, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter had answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

The disciples had already witnessed the Transfiguration...that mountaintop experience when Jesus’ clothes had become a dazzling white and he was in the company of Moses and Elijah -- I cannot imagine a clearer demonstration of the reality that Jesus was the very fulfillment of all the law and all the prophets.

We also need to know that prior to this morning’s NT Lesson, Jesus had told his disciples what awaited him in Jerusalem / that in Jerusalem he would be handed over to the authorities,

and he would suffer, and he would die.

Now, in the disciple's mind, that was terrible news...but there was a silver lining: if what Jesus said was really about to happen, then God's kingdom was coming...and, if, indeed, God's kingdom was drawing near then why not ask: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

After all, it is imminent, right? Inquiring minds want to know. Childish minds want to know, quite frankly! Egos still caught up in what it means to be first -- they want to know!

They want to know the extent to which they will be honored for their work / their commitment / their faith / their following. Was it worth it? What will be our reward? "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

And who is the greatest? Well, it is that child over there...the one that was brought to Jesus...that little bitty one, probably no more than 2 or 3 years old.

"Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

And this is not to suggest that we become childlike...Jesus is not telling us here to have the faith of a simpleton...this is not to say that we don't need doctrine or a faith that seeks understanding.

Our OT Lesson makes it clear that we are blessed when we delight in the law of the Lord and when we meditate on it day and night. And when the Bible talks about God's law in that context...to the Jews, what is being talked about is God's Word / the Bible.

In other words, studying God's Word, meditating upon it -- doing so by no means exists in contradiction to becoming like children. If anything, becoming informed -- eating the substance / the meat of the Gospel -- it makes us strong...according to the Psalmist, it makes us strong like trees planted by streams of water!

Now, the opposite of this is for us to follow other words of instruction...the ways of the world, perhaps / it is for us to take the path that sinners trod...and when we do that...we have no staying power / we are nothing like a tree!

The Bible likens it to a pitchfork that the farmer uses to sift the grain that is wanted and the chaff that is not, throwing all of it up in the air...because the chaff is so light, even the slightest breeze blows it away, and the grain stays where it belongs. (PAUSE)

So, what is Jesus telling us about becoming like children? Well, thank goodness Jesus says it plainly...he says that it means for us to be humble like a child.

Think about a child / a lovely and yet imperfect child -- and if you don't have any personal experience with 2- or 3-year-old just trust me when I say that they are not always little angels. They are human just like the rest of us. They may not be as sophisticated in their sins, but they are by no means immune to the fallenness of the human condition...so what of their humility?

Well, consider how it is that a child has not yet come to think that they know it all; ah, but mommy and daddy, they know everything! To a child, a parent is like a god to them. If a parent says it, it must be true...and the child believes it!

Is that not what it means to become like children...to come to terms with the fact that we don't have all the answers...to set aside our desires to be first / any notions that we may have of being the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven!

What if we always took God at His word? What if we always trusted and believed in what God said? What if we truly became humble...like a child!

When we start out in life and in faith, we are young and immature...and we are also vulnerable -- and Jesus knows this, which is why he went on to say that it is our Christian duty not only to welcome children, but to protect them!

This is why we baptize our children; it is why we have children's choirs and Kirk Club – it is why we are offering a 6-week parenting class beginning next month.

We offer these things / we do these things because the love of God compels us to do them...it is all part of training up our children in the way they should go...

Ah, but heaven forbid we cause them to sin. Heaven forbid we do anything that would contribute to them pledging their allegiance to something other than God. (PAUSE)

Tell me, what lessons are we teaching them if, for example, we do not function as the very parental controls that we are called to be, and if we turn them loose to television or social media, and allow the messages contained therein to become for them the metanarrative of their life...rather than the Word of God! Oh, I suppose we can cause our little ones to stumble in all kinds of ways.

But Jesus is not just talking here about children in the strictest sense of the term / he's not just talking about 2- and 3-year-olds -- he's talking about the spiritual welfare of any of God's children who are especially young and impressionable in the faith, and he's talking about not doing anything that might cause them to stumble in their spiritual journey.

The word Matthew uses here to describe stumbling or offending is the word from which we get scandal, and in the ancient world this wording in Matthew's Gospel would have carried with itself an image of a device used to catch birds / a baited trap that would lure the bird in and would then close and trap it.

Jesus is talking here about setting traps for others, and this may make us feel somewhat better, because, while we may inadvertently cause someone to stumble, it is not like any of us are trying to lead someone astray.

When our family visited Rome last summer, we were warned to watch out for the gypsy kids / those children who could be found in the public squares and who had been trained and were proficient at pick pocketing tourists.

But think about it – those children were not born with sticky fingers / they had to be taught those criminally invasive skills...they had to be led down that path...someone caused them to stumble! (PAUSE)

There is a problem, however, when we look solely at the sins of others and presume that only their particular sins of commission count.

What of the anger that we fail to harness; the unkind word / the gossip that we do not refrain from speaking. What of our idolatry to self...I mean, what are we teaching someone when we yield not to God but to ourselves and to our pervasive desire to be great!

...Or what of our sins of omission...our sins of neglect...I dare say that we have just as many of those! (PAUSE)

What the world needs, and what Jesus invites us to do – for those people around us all of the time who may be young or old, but who are young in the faith...oh, they desperately need an example of how to love God...not how to offend God!

In 1 Corinthians 8, the Apostle Paul was expressing where he came down on the issue of eating food that had been previously sacrificed to idols.

Paul knew that he was no worse off if he ate it, no better off if he refrained, but because of the fact that if he ate the meat it might serve as a source of confusion for someone who's conscience was weak and would thereby cause them to sin in their own life...Paul decided to avoid it altogether.

Paul put it like this: "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."

Friends, the way we love those neighbors of ours who are young and growing as followers of Jesus / the work we do to safeguard their welfare and to help them be strong for having meditated upon the Word of God ...oh, it is so important to God...that when we do it unto them, it is as if we are doing unto Him.

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

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.