

Daily Devotion for Wednesday September 23, 2020

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² He called a child, whom he put among them,³ and 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.” – Matthew 18:1-5

“At that time” in this passage refers to an anxious, confusing time for the disciples. Now about two-thirds of the way through Matthew’s gospel, three of them have just witnessed the dramatic “Transfiguration” scene, then followed Jesus back down the mountain into a crowd waiting for a boy to be healed. The disciples struggle to understand their own power and the power of Jesus – and then they hear him say, for the second time, that he would soon be betrayed into human hands, and killed, and on the third day be raised. Jesus is preparing them for a trip toward Jerusalem, which will begin with Matthew 19:1.

It’s in that context, *at that time*, that the disciples come as a group to Jesus and want to know who is the greatest. They seem to be trying to position themselves for a good seat, a place of honor, when the reign of God comes. And again Jesus surprises them, reversing their expectations. Who is greatest? Not a warrior, not a ruler, not a prophet or sage, but a child. And the word means a *young* child, not old enough to be self-sufficient. Jesus also tells the disciples that they must *change* – more literally, *turn* in order to *become* – like this little child, each one *humbling* himself, putting himself in a lower position of vulnerability. Disciples are to *be like* this child, and also to *welcome* others who are like this child. In most of the rest of Matthew 18, Jesus tells parables and gives counsel on how to live this kind of life: Do what’s best for others. Go looking for the lost. Seek reconciliation, when relationships are damaged. Forgive, and keep forgiving.

We, too, live in an anxious, confusing time. And we might find ourselves asking: So how do we live? What does God want from us? How will we know we’ll be all right with God? There are voices all around us that offer answers: Obey this list of things you have to do. Invest here. Align yourself with this political party. Be shrewd in placing yourself ahead of others. Sign yourself up for a life of striving! Or ... we could listen to Jesus. His answer to the disciples’ question shows that God’s way of life is not really about “greatness” at all, in the sense that the powers of the world understand it. Instead, “greatness” consists of smallness, faithfulness, and godliness. Nobody needs to scramble for position or push other people down. We just recognize our need for God and all that God provides. And we aim to live lives of humility and service and welcome, seeking the best for others. In this way we become imitators of Jesus himself, and remain close to him in the reign of God.

God of great love, thank you for receiving our questions and prayers of anxiety and confusion. Thank you for your patience with our misplaced priorities, your compassion in giving us your example for life. Turn us and teach us, so that we can place ourselves simply and humbly under your care. Work within us, so that in this time, in any time, we can be witnesses to the surprising power of your reign, now and forever. Amen.