

## Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 6, 2020

Psalm 32:1-7 (NIV) <sup>1</sup>Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. <sup>2</sup>Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. <sup>3</sup>When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. <sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. *Selah* <sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"—and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah* <sup>6</sup>Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. <sup>7</sup>You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. *Selah*

Ezekiel 33:7-9 (NIV) <sup>7</sup>"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup>When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. <sup>9</sup>But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

Romans 13:1-10 (NIV) <sup>1</sup>Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup>Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. <sup>4</sup>For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is

God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup>This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. <sup>7</sup>Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. <sup>8</sup>Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup>The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup>Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Matthew 18:1-20 (NIV) <sup>1</sup>At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup>He called a little child and had him stand among them. <sup>3</sup>And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup>"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. <sup>6</sup>But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. <sup>7</sup>"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! <sup>8</sup>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 crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. <sup>9</sup>And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. <sup>10</sup>"See that you do not look down on one of these

little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. <sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup>"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? <sup>13</sup>And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. <sup>14</sup>In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. <sup>15</sup>"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. <sup>16</sup>But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>"*Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.* <sup>20</sup>*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*"

## ***Children of the Kingdom***

Matthew 18:1-20

- ❖ **Becoming like a little child**  
(verses 1-3)
- ❖ **The humility of God's children**  
(verses 3-5; Philippians 2:3-5, 8)
- ❖ **The protection of God's children**  
(verses 6-9; Psalm 32:7)
- ❖ **The precious value of God's children**  
(verses 10-14)
- ❖ **The reconciliation of God's Children**  
(verse 15; Romans 13:10)
- ❖ **The responsibility of God's children**  
(verses 16-18; Ezekiel 33:7-9)
- ❖ **The unity of God's Children**  
(verses 19-20; Romans 15:5-7)

Benediction: Romans 15:5-6: *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

## ***Children of the Kingdom***

Matthew 18:1-20

One Sunday, at the congregation I served in Illinois, a little brown envelope was placed in our church offering. The envelope was from the pew rack and stamped, “Radio Ministry,” for the purpose of making a contribution towards broadcasting the Sunday messages on the local radio station. That designation was crossed out in crayon, and written below it, in a child’s handwriting, were these instructions: “To: the lord—do not read.”

Well, after an usher handed me the envelope and I read the message on the outside . . . I just had to open it to see what this child was offering to “the Lord.”

Inside was a folded 3 x 5 card on which was written, “To: Lord from: Sabrina.” Now you need to know that Sabrina, who was maybe seven-years old at the time, was one of the kids picked up by the church van each Wednesday evening, for Kids Klub, and each Sunday morning, for worship.

Her homelife was highly dysfunctional. She and the two younger siblings that came with her, each had a different father; none of whom was the man who now lived in their home with their mother.

Their mother never attended worship and was quite happy to have the church get the kids out of the house twice a week. The only time we saw any parent was when the father of Sabrina’s younger sister got out of prison and started coming to church.

Sabrina was a very sweet but hyperactive child, who was frequently disruptive in worship, and lied just about every time you asked her a question.

And this is what she wrote to “the Lord,” (spelling corrected). “Dear God, Today I had a lot of fun in church. I sang along to the songs. I was out of breath. It was so fun, thank you. I want to go to heaven. Your child, Sabrina.”

Jesus said in our gospel lesson today, <sup>5</sup>*And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.*

It is evident from the Gospels that Jesus loved children. He gathered them in his arms after his disciples tried to shoo them away.

Today’s sermon is titled, *Children of the Kingdom*, and is part of a series of messages from the Gospel of Matthew on *The Good News of the Kingdom*.

In our gospel lesson Jesus used a little child to illustrate an important truth about the kingdom of heaven, and how we, as children of God, are to live within the family of God.

The text before us today begins with a question:

<sup>1</sup>*At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*

The question is more precisely translated: *who then is greater in the kingdom of heaven.*

What they wanted to know was, which one of them would be greater than the others in Christ’s coming kingdom. They wanted to know their pecking order. They sought to identify which of them would have the most honored positions in Jesus’ new regime—who would receive the plum places within his cabinet?

The parallel passage in Luke 9:46 makes that clear when it informs us that an *argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest.* (NASB)

This wouldn’t be the last time that debate arose. James and John later angled for the top jobs (Matthew 20:20), and Luke tells us that the disciples were still arguing about it at the last supper! (Luke 22:24)

Now, we might be a little more forgiving of their arrogance if it wasn’t for the lesson Jesus had already tried to teach them, which we heard last week in Matthew 16:

<sup>24</sup>*Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and*

follow me. <sup>25</sup>For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

Apparently, the disciples didn't get the memo. Their lack of comprehension here seems astounding!

Instead of choosing the way of denying themselves, they chose the way of aggrandizing themselves. That is (according to Merriam Webster) "to enhance the power, wealth, position, or reputation of themselves."

Bible scholar William Barclay comments: "the very fact that they asked that question showed that they had no idea at all what the Kingdom of Heaven was."

Jesus said in response: *unless you change . . . you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* More literally the text says, *unless you turn.* That is turn around, repent.

(Just so you know, I often don't agree with William Barclay, but there are occasional gems in his commentary, and in this passage, he perfectly nails it!)

Barclay notes: "Jesus was warning them that they were going in completely the wrong direction, away from the Kingdom of Heaven and not towards it."

The disciples had their focus (to quote Barclay) on "the fulfilment of personal ambition, the acquisition of personal power, the enjoyment of personal prestige, the exaltation of self; [they were] aiming at precisely the opposite of the Kingdom of Heaven; for to be a citizen of the Kingdom means the complete forgetting of self, the obliteration of self, the spending of self in a life which aims at service and not at power."

"So long as a person considers [themselves] as the most important thing in the world, their back is turned to the Kingdom; . . . to reach the Kingdom, one must turn around and face in the opposite direction."

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus teaches his disciples that entrance into the kingdom, and greatness in it, requires

### **Becoming like a little child**

<sup>2</sup>He called a little child and had him stand among them.  
<sup>3</sup>And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

We are told here that Jesus called a little child to come to Him. The Greek word used here means toddler. This child must have been familiar with Jesus (and we should say comfortable with Him) because the child obeyed. Mark tells us that then Jesus held the child in his arms and on His lap.

In contrast with the disciples who were seeking status, Jesus placed a child before them who had the lowest status in society. The *Bible Background Commentary* notes that "the most powerless members of ancient society were little children; age increased one's social status and authority. In Jewish culture, children were loved . . . but . . . they had no status apart from that love, and no power or privileges apart from what they received as total dependents on their parents."

So here Jesus was saying that being children of the kingdom is to accept that they have no status, no power or privileges, apart from what they receive from their heavenly Father out of His love, in total dependence upon Him. That's what it means to *become like little children.*

Jesus said *unless you change* your attitude and ambitions, and accept the status of a little child, *you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* This word never is the strongest possible language that could be used.

It is very much the same as when Jesus told Nicodemus in John chapter 3, *you must be born again!*

We must become children of God *by water and the spirit* to enter the kingdom of God.

The whole passage in front of us hangs on this concept of being a child of God, having no status, no power or privileges, apart from what we receive from our heavenly Father out of His love, in total dependence upon Him.

Jesus then revealed how the disciples should become like little children to emphasize the importance of

### **The humility of God's children** (verses 4-5)

*<sup>4</sup>Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup>And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.*

To humble ourselves *like this child* means to relinquish all claim to status, power or prestige. Indeed, when we let go of all these, we become more like Jesus as we are told in Philippians 2:3-5, 8.

*<sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!* (NIV)

Jesus set the example of humility—He became a child for our sake, so <sup>5</sup>. . . *whoever welcomes a little child like this* in the name of Jesus, welcomes Jesus.

Jesus then warns them on the special care required for

### **The protection of God's children** (verses 6-9)

*<sup>6</sup>But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. <sup>7</sup>Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!*

Little ones in this passage, and in other places in Matthew, does not refer to infants or even infants in Christ. It means all believers in Jesus. To repeat what I said at the beginning, our gospel uses the theme of little children to teach how we, as children of God, are to live

within the family of God—the Church. In the family of God, we must take special care not to cause a fellow believer to sin, or tempt them to sin.

Children are among the most vulnerable in any society, and need our care and protection. It is a horrifying statistic that in our country at least 4 children die every day of child abuse and neglect.

In the strongest possible terms, Jesus warns us not to, literally be a stumbling block, for *one of these little ones who believe in me*.

God promises to protect His children and so should we.

Our Psalm this morning, Psalm 32:7 speaks of that protection: *You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.* (NIV)

We must also take special care of our own spiritual life and cut everything out of our lives that may lead us into sin. Jesus said,

*<sup>8</sup>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 crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. <sup>9</sup>And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.*

Jesus is using strong language here. He is not advocating physical dismemberment. Jesus is using hyperbole to urge us to cut anything out of our lives that would lead us or other believers to sin.

There are times when surgery is required for the physical health of the body. A cancerous growth must be removed to save the rest of the body—and a life. A limb must be amputated when it becomes necrotic, or it threatens the health of the whole body.

In the same way, if any sin in our lives becomes a cancerous lesion—we must excise it—cut it off—amputate it from our habits, affections and lifestyle.

We must remember that Jesus commands this for our protection and for the protection of the body of Christ—the Church. Jesus warns us of the horrors of hell because he does not want any of his children to be eternally lost—He paid too great a price for our redemption, our forgiveness, our salvation—for us to reject it because we love our sin more than Him.

And that leads us to the next truth Jesus taught of

### **The precious value of God's children** (verses 10-14)

*10"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. 11 12"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.*

There is much to say here which we cannot delve into now. Suffice it to say that Jesus declares the precious value of every child of God when He said, *your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.* Again, Jesus uses the term little one to refer to all believers.

And because each of child of God is precious and infinitely valuable, Jesus then taught them the necessity of

### **The reconciliation of God's Children** (verse 15)

*15"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*

Jesus paid a great price to reconcile us to God, and we should do everything in our power to be reconciled—at peace—with our brother or sister in Christ. However, if a believer refuses to be reconciled—and does not deal with their sin, then Jesus instructs his disciples in

### **The responsibility of God's children** (verses 16-18)

*16But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

In the body of Christ, we are given the great responsibility through the delegated power of *binding and loosing*—what in Matthew 16 is called the keys of the kingdom, and is referred to in our catechism as the office of the keys. It is the power to forgive and restore (as we will hear about next week) and the power to exclude the unrepentant from fellowship in the family of God.

That responsibility is clearly stated in our Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel 33:7-9 *7"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. 8When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. 9But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.*

This is not something most of us feel comfortable doing. I'm sure most of us would endure oral surgery than have to confront a fellow believer about their sin.

We fear that these types of encounters won't go well. We, and the church, don't want to be labelled as judgmental, or worse, in our politicized culture today, to be accused of a hate crime. But it must be done.

In one of the congregations I served, there was a man—a husband and a father—who was becoming more involved in the church, according to his gifts and skills. But it became increasingly apparent that there was

something amiss: the hint of alcohol on his breath, even as he entered the sanctuary for worship; and the undercurrents of tension in his home because of his anger.

The elders and I agonized over how to handle this. This man could be explosive, but we couldn't ignore it for the health of his family and for the family of God.

We prayed, and those prayers were answered with a knock on my door. The man's brother came to ask me to confront the issue. He had seen his brother's life increasingly unravel with greater and greater alcohol abuse, and no matter what he said, his brother wouldn't listen and made excuses for his behavior. He told me the man's wife was ready to leave him, to walk out the door with their daughter.

The brother and the man's wife had planned on giving him an ultimatum—get into treatment or she would leave and he would cut ties with his brother.

He requested that I come with him, right then, to confront his brother and ask, as his pastor, if he would consent to treatment. It was one of the hardest things I ever did, and one of the most rewarding.

With tears of love and a heart of humility, I shared with this man my own problems with anger and my own sin that I still struggled against. In answer to many prayers, he responded with brokenness and repentance and checked himself into a treatment program that night.

Today he shares his testimony freely and frequently—with humility—giving thanks for the grace of God that turned his life around. *Turn . . . remember, that is what Jesus calls us to do, to turn and become children.*

We must obey the Lord's direction and leave the results to Him. But any confrontation must be done in humility and love. Our epistle lesson from Romans 12 tells us:

*<sup>9</sup>The commandments . . . are summed up in this one rule:*

*"Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup>Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

This responsibility of binding and loosing, is dependent on, and essential to, our final point on

### **The unity of God's Children** (verses 19-20)

*<sup>19</sup>"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*

Jesus said that to agree, to have unity, is essential to answered prayer. Up until this point, the disciples had not agreed on anything—other than to follow Jesus.

There is power in the unity of believers—through unity prayers are answered and Jesus is present. *<sup>20</sup>For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*

Romans 15:5-7: *<sup>5</sup>May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (NIV)*

And so, we ourselves are to *become like a little child*, welcoming one another and accepting one another with **humility**, and in doing so, we follow the example of our Lord.

We are called to **protect** God's children, and our own walk with the Lord, because we and them are of infinitely **precious value** to our heavenly Father. And so, we must accept the **responsibility** to do everything possible to be **reconciled** with our spiritual siblings in order for there to be **unity** in the family of God.

We are to turn, to repent, and become like little children, with humility, having no status, no power or privileges, apart from what we receive from our heavenly Father out of His love, in total dependence upon Him.

Let us pray . . .