

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY
September 7, 2008

Children: Greatest in Heaven

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon today comes from the Gospel, which was read earlier.

If you caught any bit of the 2008 Summer Olympics, you will be able to see which country was the greatest with regards to medals: the United States took the medal count with 110. If you look at the greatest athlete at the games, one would say the greatest would be Michael Phelps. He went a perfect 8-for-8 in Beijing, breaking Mark Spitz's single-Games record for gold medals. He swam 17 times over nine days and broke the world record in four of his five individual swims. His three relay teams also set world marks. The United States and Michael Phelps are arguably the greatest of the 2008 Summer Olympics. But what about all the other Olympic athletes who didn't win a medal? Because they didn't win a medal, does that mean that they are not the greatest?

The same question was made by the disciples with regards to heaven: "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" They had discussed among themselves on the road to Capernaum. They had held their peace because of a guilty feeling. They wanted to know who was greater. The implication was that all of the Twelve would be great, yet that some would be greater than the rest. On the road, the Twelve had had their dispute, and Jesus had delayed until this time in order most thoroughly to settle this question that was so fraught with danger because of envy, jealousy, pride and hatred. There was a possibility that it might disrupt this little band of twelve.

Mark describes Jesus as sitting down and then calling the Twelve to Himself and making an opening statement before He called the little child to Himself. So, after the disciples had confessed their dispute, we must imagine that Jesus formally seated Himself, His manner indicating that He intended once for all to clear up this question of precedence and greatness in His kingdom. Who is the greatest: a child.

Everybody thinks babies are cute and cuddly; I'll be the first to agree with that statement. Besides entertainment value, rarely do adults consider that such little ones could ever be of much practical use. Jesus has a different view. These babies grow into something far valuable than we could ever imagine: children. He says that we must all become children in order to be saved and enter heaven. From the high places in the kingdom after which the disciples were striving, Jesus takes them back to the very portal of that kingdom. The disciples are given two choices: receive a child in Jesus' name or cause a child to sin.

Jesus gives us the formula of salvation: faith like a child. Faith like a child is not something that comes easy, especially to adults. We grow up, we learn to be self-dependant. We even adopt the idea of "survival of the fittest." We are taught to strive to be the greatest in all that we do. Maybe you have heard the saying, "Second place is the first loser." Who is stronger: a weak child or a strong man? For Jesus, faith is best seen not by a man, but by a child.

Jesus has in mind the turning which is usually called conversion, equivalent to the regeneration He required of Nicodemus. To permit oneself to be called, led, loved, without pride and without doubt, in simple trust, that is childlikeness even as this is the nature of children who possess nothing but need everything; who are able to do nothing

but receive everything as a gift – this must be the way for all who desire to enter the kingdom of heaven. Humble trustfulness is a good summary of what Jesus has in mind, this translated into the spiritual realm, into our relation to Jesus. A king's child plays with a beggar's child, and neither feels above the other. We bring our children up, while God brings His children down. Many have thought that children must first grow to manhood before they can enter the kingdom; Jesus reverses this: He teaches that the disciples must go back and become little children.

There are certain false teachings in the Church which may cause us to stumble. One such practice is the theology of glory. The theology of glory places greater emphasis on human abilities and human reason. It expects favorable results if we do our part. This thinking is quite opposite the child's helplessly receiving whatever comes. Another false teaching of the Church is withholding Baptism from an infant. There are those who do not practice infant Baptism because they say that a child cannot believe. However, their logic is flawed. A child can believe. A child can talk, a child can walk, and a child can sin. Those who believe this way suggest that an adult's reason or ability to believe is necessary for and contributes to salvation. That is not what we see in Scripture. Jesus says at the end of Matthew, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....*" Under the category of "all nations" fall infants. They are just as capable of having faith to receive the gift of Holy Baptism, just as any adult is.

If we are to follow the words of Jesus, how do we "*turn and become like children?*" We do not become like children by our own actions. Our sin hinders us from becoming like children. Because of our sin, we are not able to see ourselves as children:

doing what we ought not to do, going where we ought not go, looking, leering, and imagining what we ought not see. We deceive ourselves if we think that there is anything that we can do to save ourselves. Salvation comes only by faith, faith like a child.

How does one become a child of faith? It is difficult, no doubt about it. Our minds must be transformed by the Word of Jesus, not by the word of the world. We must solely rely on God and Him alone to provide us with our daily bread. We must rely on Jesus to be who He says He is: “*the way, and the truth, and the life.*” We must **not** rely on our own thoughts, words, or deeds to bring about our salvation. We must **not** rely on the world to give to us everlasting life. It is purely the act of the Holy Spirit to give to us faith. The Holy Spirit reveals how we, as dependent, weak, and helpless babes, are cradled in the arms of God. When our hearts and minds are reshaped by Word and Sacrament, we gain an awareness of this truth.

Earlier I mentioned a false teaching of the Church – the theology of glory. It sounds very good and very promising. However, the theology of glory is not what we find in Scripture. We don’t see our lives played out like the movie, *Field of Dreams*. Our lives are not, “If you want it” or “If you do it, God will give it.” That is not how God works. He gives to us that which we need to sustain our bodies and lives each day. We must reject this idea of theology of glory and instead focus on a theology of the cross. That is done when we think not of our faith in terms of adult-mindedness, but in simple terms as a child. That is the same thing that Jesus does in our text. He rejects the false teachings of the Christian world in much the same way. He makes clear that “*these little ones...believe in me.*”

One thing that is confusing to me is when a church, during the Divine Service, has “children’s church” at the same time. “Children’s church” is taking the young children out of the Divine Service and having an extended Sunday School time, or “church” that is more of a play time with games so that they don’t interrupt the Divine Service for the adults. Here’s the problem: if the children are off having “children’s church,” how will they learn to behave in the Divine Service? How will they begin to learn what is taking place in the Divine Service?

Becoming children of God is indeed hard for us adults – and that includes the hard-hearted “adults” we are from the moment of conception, at birth, and at any age throughout life. In fact, it’s impossible for us. But it has happened already. Jesus, the only Son of the Father, makes us children of that same Father by Holy Baptism. We see that displayed for us in Infant Baptism; the most beautiful display of the Gospel, because it visually demonstrates our complete dependence on God and His grace: every Christian is a tiny child in the arms of Jesus. In Jesus’ name, amen. Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus until life everlasting, amen.