

“Calling Sinners Home” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Pentecost 15 September 9, 2023

- I. **Matthew 18:1-20** – previously read
- II. **I want you to try on some of these words for size...**
 - a. What would it be like if you were... Powerless... Dependent... Weak... Immature... Needy... Lowly...?
 - b. What kinds of feelings come up when you when hear the words... Submit... Surrender... Forfeit... Give up...?
 - c. For many of you, these words can even cause a visceral response –
 - i. No way! I don't give up, give in, or submit to anyone or anything!
 - d. I remember the day I was at a wedding rehearsal and the bride to be was practicing her vows as I said... “will you love him, comfort him, honor him, obey him...” and before I could continue the bride's mother broke out laughing!
 - i. It was obvious that she found the idea of “obey” your husband as an ancient, patriarchal tradition that was ridiculous by today's standards.
 - ii. But what most people don't understand is that submitting to another person is the rarest of gifts – it says that you trust that person to do the right things and live up to their responsibility in caring for you.
 - iii. Submitting to another is actually building up and edifying them to fill a role... you entrust something to them of your own free will... it's a gift.
 - e. No, we would much rather be the greatest or the strongest, and this is the question that kicks off our reading today – “Jesus, who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”
 - f. Well, answer the question like any normal person from our world, and the qualities that make a person great are strength, wisdom, knowledge, influence... even things like wealth, attractiveness, and fame would be on the list.
 - g. Even today, children are not high on the list of who's the greatest – we might see them as wonderful gifts with lots of potential, but not a role model for how to act or think.
 - h. From the youngest of ages we are taught to grow up and become like the adults around us...
 - i. Remember when our grandparents would say that children are to be seen but not heard?
 - ii. Or, when our parents had a special dinner party or guests, the children were told to go to a different part of the house to play quietly?
 1. Society has come a long way by including children in many activities, but parents are training up the kids to be well adjusted adults... not the other way around!
- III. **Jesus is teaching His followers about true greatness.**

- a. It seems that the disciples were often posturing to figure out who was the best, or setting up the pecking order.
- b. The question of who is the greatest comes on the heels of a big event called the Transfiguration – or when Jesus revealed His divine glory to Peter, James, and John.
 - i. Maybe they were wondering if they might be in the “great” category after witnessing Moses and Elijah, hearing God the Father speak to them directly, and being told to keep the whole thing a secret for now.
- c. We all have a tendency to feel more important when we have special responsibilities, and the disciples were no different.
- d. Jesus is so good at shaking up our beliefs and traditions, especially those connected to our pride and ego.
- e. He calls a little child into the conversation, who would normally be outside the circle – and explains that anyone who humbles themselves to be like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (vs 4)
 - i. It’s important to note that Jesus is not saying that a child is innocent, without sin, or perfect... but that we are to humble ourselves to be like a child... in other words, turning from the adult concepts of greatness.... and becoming needy, dependent, and helpless without our Parent.
 - ii. Jesus wants His followers to give up their pride... give up their ideas of power and greatness... give up their egos and illusions of grandeur... and repent.
 - iii. Jesus is calling sinners home.

IV. **Our biggest challenge is our own pride.**

- a. Pride and ego are the internal enemies of every person since the fall of Adam and Eve...
- b. Our first ancestors chose a different path than obeying their Creator... they did not trust in God alone and went their own way.
- c. Unfortunately, that sin of pride is passed down from generation to generation – and why we struggle so much to let God take the reins.
- d. Consider our own lives and take an inventory:
 - i. Do we wake up in the morning and hit our knees, praying for God’s will in our lives and the power to carry it out?
 - ii. Do we spend time each day considering our sins against God and others, and then turning to God seeking forgiveness?
 - iii. Is God the leader and guide in our lives based on what the Bible says, or do we make up what we think God wants?
 - 1. In other words, are we just operating on our own beliefs rather than what’s really in the Bible?
 - iv. Do we spend the majority of our time focused our own needs rather than the needs of others?

- v. Are we humble enough to admit our mistakes and seek forgiveness from others?
- vi. Do we daily take up our cross and follow Jesus, rather than spend our time figuring out how to make ourselves happy?
- e. Not even the disciples who spent time directly in Jesus' presence could answer these questions perfectly and without hesitation – because sin and pride were a part of them too.
- f. The only answer for any of us comes in the words of our Savior, as we humble ourselves and become like a needy, helpless child – giving up our pride and coming home to Jesus.

V. **Our great Savior never gave in to pride.**

- a. Just consider how many times Jesus could have turned away from His Father's will and done what He wanted.
 - i. Even coming to earth as a baby... as He might have said that He is divine and would never stoop so low as to become a simple human being in a broken world.
 - ii. Throughout all His earthly life, He never did His own will, but always prayed and sought guidance.
 - iii. The hardships, trials, and opposition He faced were always met with humility – even when He could have called in help to save Himself.
 - iv. Ultimately, as Philippians 2 puts it so wonderfully about Jesus, “⁶ who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8 ESV)
 - v. The ultimate act of humility was Jesus' willing to set aside His divine nature and give up His life to save us from the sin that would consume us.
 - vi. We are free from our death sentence and an eternity without God's presence – as Jesus took all our punishment upon Himself.
- b. Jesus helps us to see how greatness comes through emptying ourselves, humbling ourselves, and trusting in our Father completely.

VI. **Yes, Jesus still has radical views even for us today.**

- a. Give up, surrender, be powerless, let go... and humbly let God take control.
- b. No doubt, pride and our worldly views will get in the way of this call to humility, but we have our whole earthly lives to work on it.
- c. I'm reminded of a song we sometimes sing on Ash Wednesday called, From Depths Of Woe I Cry To Thee, as it says, “Though great our sins, yet greater still is God's abundant favor.” (LSB 607)
 - i. Yes, when we ask who is the greatest, it really points to the greatness of our sins... but greater still is God's abundant favor.

- d. Greatness is always based on... and found in God Himself, and that is why He is always calling us to turn from our sin of pride... and come home.
- e. Nowhere else will we ever find greatness – except in the greatness of God's abundant favor. Amen.