

"Humble Greatness"

Listening to God's Word

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Matthew 18.1-5

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Back in September, I reflected on Psalm 1.¹ It talks about how when we find joy in God's Torah — Torah is the Hebrew word meaning instruction or teaching — and when we are constantly absorbing God's Torah, we are like a tree by a river, drawing nourishment from its waters.

I took this Jewish Psalm and did a riff on it as someone who belongs to Jesus.

*You are living a good life when you delight in the Torah of Jesus
and are absorbing it all the time.
You are like a tree growing by a stream, bearing fruit in your life,
as you absorb the Scriptures,
as God's Word percolates through you,
not too fast, just right.*

Percolation through soil or, my favourite, coffee grounds, takes time. You can't rush it. So we've been slowing down, letting a piece of Scripture absorb into us. We're following a 3-week cycle with the same Bible passage. Today we start a new one, and begin with LISTENING.

II

Before we hear God's Word, we need to ask for God's help. I found this pray by Origen of Alexandria, an African Christian in the 3rd century. May its words help us pray.

Lord, inspire us to read your Scriptures and to meditate upon them day and night. We beg you to give us real understanding of what we need, that we in turn may put its teaching into practice. Yet we know that understanding and good intentions are worthless, unless rooted in your graceful love. So we ask that the words of Scripture may also be not just signs on a page, but channels of grace into our hearts. Amen

¹ "Percolating the Scriptures," preached on September 5, 2021.

elorauc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-09-05-Percolating-the-Scriptures.pdf

Matthew 18:1-5

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." (New Revised Standard Version)

III

As we go along, we'll hear this story a few more times, tasting more and more what Jesus wants to give us.

But let's start with their question: *Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?*

The Kingdom comes when God's will is done all over the earth, just as it is already in heaven. Jesus brings God's Kingdom. We're following Jesus, and we're anticipating it. We wonder, Who will have pride of place? Who will be most important?

Like Moses, leading God's People from slavery, and delivering God's Torah to them? Like David, deeply faithful, victorious in battle, sensitive in song? Like Solomon, blessed with wisdom? Like Elijah, on fire for God? They were all great! Who is the greatest?

Who would you add? Who models greatness for you? Who do you look up to?

How do you think others living around you would answer?

What sort of greatness makes the news? Wins the awards? Earns promotions and raises? Gets Nobel prizes? Who are thought-leaders, innovators, movers and shakers? Who draws a crowd?

Well, you already heard Jesus' answer. Do you remembering? How does his answer sit with you? I mean, really. How do you think it landed back when he first gave it?

IV

Amalie is going to read it this time, and more slowly.

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V

What is it about a child?

They are asking about greatness. Jesus's answer will say what is important in God's Kingdom. What sort of person demonstrates how to live when God rules? If the Kingdom had a citizenship exam, who would get top marks?

A child. Really? A child.

If Jesus wants us to say, "Aw. Ain't that sweet," fine.

But we need God's Kingdom to burst into this world that has so much wrong in it. Do you really think that a child, or an army of children, is up to the task? This is a serious question. We need a serious answer.

I think Jesus is taking this very seriously. So, why a child?

Jesus does not give this toddler a politician's kiss. No, he looks at us. *You need to become like this kid. Otherwise, you won't belong in God's kingdom.*

What is it about a child that you, and I, and everyone needs to become?

VI

Listen again. This time, Maya is doing the reading.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Then he called a little child over to sit among the disciples, and said, "I assure you that if you don't turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Common English Bible)

VII

Humble.

Jesus gives the answer. We need to be humble like a child is humble, to fit into God's Kingdom.

Back then, children definitely *were* humble. Humbleness is about status, about where you fit in relation to others. Children had no status.

Think about it. Children demand a lot of time, take a lot of labour, use a lot of resources, and contribute nothing. When you're scraping to get by as a family, children are a draw on your resources. Also, lot of children died of disease, hunger, and other things before they could give anything back. Tragic, but true. Our sentimental view of childhood as an ideal time is a modern invention.

They loved their kids, of course. But they did not have a high view of the wonders of childhood. Quite reasonably, a child's value was only in what it would be when it was no longer a child: when she was old enough to have babies, and he was old enough to earn income.

Until then, a child was a nobody. That's pretty much the dictionary definition of "humble."²

² Tom Wright explains that "Children were frequently seen as only half-human until they had reach puberty, perhaps for the worrying reason that until they were available as sexual partners adults wouldn't want to know about them. Girls in particular suffered." He also observes that in the Greek language in which the New Testament was written, "the words for 'child' are mostly neither masculine

Now Jesus is telling us, *"It's time for you to grow . . . down and become like this child. Humble yourself to the status of this toddler. That's God's idea of greatness!"*

VIII

I've known this story since before Sunday School. I hear it once, and I know what it means. I listen closer, again and again, and discover more and more what a child meant, and what Jesus is asking of us, and I understand it less and less.

That's probably a good thing.

Next week, I'll need to dig into what Jesus means about being humble, and what we need children to teach us, and, I hope, see how this is good news for us.

Two Sundays from now, you need to **RESPOND**. As God has been getting this story into you, what has God been doing to you? What have you been thinking? Wondering? Realizing? The reflection that week is your job.

Today, as we hear it one last time, think of when you were a child.

Jesus finishes by saying that, when we welcome a child — a humble child, who has nothing to offer except herself, himself — we are welcoming him. Welcoming a child creates space to receive the presence of God!

When you were a child, what could someone do to make you feel welcome?

In Jesus, God became a child. A humble child. How can you welcome him?

nor feminine, but neuter: the child wasn't a 'he' or a 'she', but simply an 'it.'" Matthew for Everyone: Part Two (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 27. See also Andrew Root, The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time Against the Speed of Modern Life (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2021), 235.

IX

Let's finish by hearing the reading one more time. Jabari is reading it for us, from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation.

At about the same time, the disciples came to Jesus asking, "Who gets the highest rank in God's kingdom?"

For an answer Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, "I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. What's more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it's the same as receiving me."