

Like a Little Child

Matthew 18:1-6

The occasion: The first Sunday of Advent

The main point: The greatest person in the kingdom (Jesus) is like a little child.

I've got a multiple choice question for you: Who do you think is the most important person in Christianity today? Is it Billy Graham, the great evangelist? Is it Tim LaHaye, who sells the most books? Is it Pope Benedict, who leads the largest segment of Christianity? How about James Dobson, who started a large and influential parachurch ministry?

Question 2: What about in our denomination? Who do you think is the most important person in our denomination? Is it the president, or the superintendent of ministers, or the person in charge of pastoral training, or the one who is planting new churches for a new generation?

Question 3: Or more locally, who is the most important person in NewLife Church? Is it the person who sets up the sound system, or the one who leads us in worship, or the person who brings the pizza? Or is it the one who makes the biggest donation?

Well, the disciples once asked Jesus a similar question, except their terminology was a little different for the circumstances.

Matthew 18, verse 1: **About that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?"** (v. 1, NLT)

Yeah, who is the most important person in God's world? In religion and spirituality, who's on the top rung of the ladder? Who's got the most power? Who is the most influential? Who is... "closest to God"?

Well, the disciples were not just asking out of intellectual curiosity. This was not a dry academic question for them. They did not just want to get the right answer on a multiple-choice test.

No, they wanted to know about the greatest because they wanted to BE the greatest. If there's going to be a great banquet in heaven, who's going to be on the head table? Who's going to be sitting right next to... the Messiah? What would it take to be right *there*, in the position of greatest honor?

Well, OK, maybe the chief seats are already taken. Abraham is probably going to be in the top spot, and Elijah and Isaiah are surely up there as well. But maybe we can be close to them, if we only knew what we were aiming for. So, what do we need to go up the ladder of spiritual success? What does it take to be counted among the greatest in the kingdom of God?

Now, at this point in their training, the disciples were not exactly spiritual giants. They were thinking about the kingdom pretty much in physical terms, like the kingdom of Israel in the days of David and Solomon, or even better, like the Roman Empire, except with a Jewish Emperor.

All the money and power in the world would flow to Jerusalem, and um, the disciples would like to be near the center of attention. And so they ask, Who's going to be the greatest in your kingdom, Jesus? What qualities and characteristics are you looking for? What do we need to do to be in the top rank, the upper class, the chief executive officers of the kingdom of God?

And so in verses 2 and 3, **Jesus called a little child to him.** The Greek word here means a child old enough to walk, but younger than puberty. The child might be like Ashley, or older, like Gian. Anyway, Jesus asked the child to come over, and the child did, and Jesus **put the child among the [disciples].**³ **Then he said, "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your**

sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Or I might paraphrase it like this: Look, guys. You want to be the greatest in the kingdom? Well, you better change the way you're thinking, or you aren't going to be there at all!

This could have come as quite a slap in the face to the disciples – I'm not sure what tone of voice Jesus used here. Maybe he was shaking his head and thinking, What am I supposed to do with a bunch of guys like this? How am I supposed to bring in a new world when these guys are so steeped in the old world? They have not even gotten to first base yet. They don't even know how to hit the ball, and they are asking about reserved spaces in the Hall of Fame.

So he says, You've got to *change* – The Greek word here means to turn, to turn around and go the other way. You guys are thinking about being the greatest? Well, give up on that! The first thing that you have to think about is being there *at all*. Don't think about going to moon, if you can't even go to Monrovia.

Well, I will give the disciples credit for one thing: They were asking the right person. Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and he knows what he's talking about. He knew what it took for *him* to be in the top spot, and the advice he gives for his disciples is something that he is willing to do himself. In fact, he had already followed his own advice. He had been there and done that, and now he could lead others to follow him through the same process.

And what was his advice? "Become like little children." You, Peter, you need to become like a little child. You need to become like E.J. Mahmoud Amadinejad, Hugo Chavez, and Bashar Assad, all you dictators, you need to become like Ashley. Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, all you billionaires, you need to become like Kaitlin. Everyone here needs to become like a little child.

And each year in the Christmas season we are reminded that Jesus did exactly that. He

did not just become LIKE a child – he became a child. He was a baby in a manger. His parents had to flee to Egypt to save the little boy’s life. He was a toddler, and a little boy cleaning up his father’s carpentry shop.

He knows exactly what it’s like to be a little child, because he was one. He knew what kind of advice he was giving his disciples: Become like little children. That’s step one in getting into the kingdom, and surprisingly enough, that’s all the other steps, too. The way you get in is also the way to be great in the kingdom – you have to be like little children.

But how? It’s like Nicodemus said to Jesus, How does that work? I can’t go back in the womb and be born all over again, so what does this figure of speech mean? *In what way* am I supposed to be like a little child?

You see, when we think of little children, we can think of specific children we know: E.J. and Anika, Gian and Kaitlin. We can think of specific qualities that they have: joy, innocence, laughter, energy, or faith. Or if you are into child development, you might think of a child who thinks that two half-cookies are just as good as two whole cookies.

Well, all of those qualities are good, but Jesus is not talking about any of them. In verse 4 he tells us what he’s thinking about: **So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.**

We need to be humble. We need humility.

But what does that mean? “Oh, shucks, it’s just me. I’ll never amount to anything, and I’m sorry that I am taking up space and breathing your air.” No, it does not mean that at all.

How about, “I am the ugliest, most stupid person on the planet and I don’t deserve anything, except a beating.” No, that’s not humility, either. That is not the attitude of Jesus, and that is not the attitude that especially characterizes his kingdom and his way of life.

So what did Jesus mean by humility?

In context, the disciples were asking about social rank in the kingdom, and that is the way that Jesus answered them – in terms of social rank. And what social rank did children have in that culture? Nada. Nothing. On one hand, they were blessings from the Lord. But on the other hand, child mortality rates meant that you never invested too much hope in any one child.

Children had no rights of their own. If a father beat his daughter and broke her arm, the neighbors would think that the father had an anger problem, but there would be no Child Protection Services coming to take the child away. It was his child, and it was his problem. Children had no rights, and no social status.

And so when the disciples were asking Jesus about having the highest social rank in the kingdom, Jesus called a child to come and be with them. It's not that *Jesus* looked on the child as the least significant person around, but he knew that the culture looked at it that way, and his disciples probably did, too. The child became an object lesson for the disciples.

Oh, so you want to be the greatest rank in the kingdom? he says. Well, you've got to change your way of thinking on that one. You have to turn around and look the other direction. Instead of setting your sights on the highest position, you need to set your sights on the lowest. You won't even be in the kingdom unless you set your sights on the lowest position, because that's what the kingdom of God is all about. It's not about rank – it's about people of low status.

Because, truth be told, absolutely everyone is of low status when it comes to spiritual significance. When someone is looking down on earth from the space station, it doesn't matter much whether you are on a tall mountain or in a deep valley, either way, you are way, way down there. Spiritually, that's where all of us are in comparison with God, and there's not much point in arguing about who is the greatest.

And like I said, Jesus is not telling us to do something that he is not willing to do himself. He was way, way up there, and he came down here – not as a superman, but as a little baby. Not as a prince in a royal palace, but as a baby born in a stable. He did not get five-star accommodations. There was no blue cross health-care coverage. When Mary went to the temple to make an offering after the birth, she gave the offering that was designated for poor families.

Jesus was a refugee in Egypt, and the firstborn son of a blue-collar worker. Firstborn sons have to do the most work, especially after the father dies. Jesus was a Jew living in a land occupied by the Romans. He had carried the Roman pack for a mile or two. He had felt the sting of injustice and prejudice and ridicule.

In this season of the year, when we think about the birth of Jesus, we are thinking of the greatest example of humility, of someone who moved down the ladder from the very top rung to the bottom rung. That's what it takes to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus became like a child – the prince of the universe became a pauper in his own kingdom. Not just for a few days, but for 33 years, and then they killed him. He claimed divine privileges to help other people, but he did not claim divine privileges to help himself. He became, in social status, like a child.

If you want to be in the kingdom, Jesus is saying, then you need to be like a child. The kingdom of God is not a place where people strive for status. Rather, it is a place where people strive for *service*, to help other people, to esteem others more important than yourself.

An eternity of social jockeying would be a frustrating eternity. You would never know when someone might jerk the rug out from under you, to pull you down so they can climb up. If you want to enjoy the life of the kingdom for all eternity, then you can't be worried about who the greatest is, because that way of thinking simply is not part of kingdom life. People in the

kingdom are not concerned about social status.

Jesus is not looking out for number 1. He was number one, and he looked out for everyone else. He was willing to give it up to serve other people, and he is *still* willing to give it up to serve other people. He is in heaven right now, serving other people, interceding for us. That's just the way he is, and that's the way he wants us to be, too.

It does not mean we grovel in the dirt and moan about how poor we are. It does not mean that we shrink back because we are so insignificant. No, Jesus did not do any of that, and true humility does not mean doing that. When we focus on our low rank, then we are too rank-conscious, and basically thinking too much about ourselves. We do not intentionally humiliate ourselves in an effort to look more "humble." We are not constantly apologizing for our status in life.

We do not seek the lowest jobs in the church so that we look more humble. Nor do we *avoid* the lowest jobs – we do them simply because they need to be done, and we happen to be there. We are not worried about whether we get any credit or whether anyone notices. We are not worried about whether it is a high-status job or a low-status job. We just do it.

We can have humility in our relationship with God, but the real test of humility is in our relationship with other people. That's what Jesus gets to in verse 5: **And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me.** Jesus is saying that if we are humble like a child, then we are going to welcome other little children. That means people who are ages 2 to 12, but it really means everyone else, too. If we view ourselves as of low social status, then we are going to be able to welcome everyone else of low social status.

And we do it *on behalf of Jesus*, because that's the sort of thing he would do. The literal translation is that we do it in the *name* of Jesus, as representatives of Jesus, and when we do it,

we are welcoming Jesus himself.

Jesus is in both places in this interaction – the person who welcomes is doing it because that’s what Jesus would do, and the one who is welcomed is also representing Jesus, because when we welcome them, we are welcoming Jesus. In this saying, Jesus is putting himself in the same social status as the little children. In fact, everybody is the same social status here.

The greatest person in the kingdom is Jesus, and we are to treat everyone as if they were the greatest, because he sees himself in the people with lowest status, and we are to treat everyone as if they were the lowest. Is that confusing? Yeah. This basically turns our ideas about social status upside down, and upside down again, until there’s no status left, except that we are all children of God.

Now, the Pharisees liked status, and in their way of thinking, religion had a lot to do with status. It was important to know who was in, and who was out. Who could you eat with, and who should you avoid? They were, figuratively speaking, saving the best seats for themselves. The rabbis sometimes compared the kingdom of heaven to a great banquet hosted by the king, and if the kingdom was like a banquet, then the Pharisees were pretty sure that they’d get the chief seats.

But Jesus was coming along and inviting other people. He would take a person who had leprosy and heal him, and say, Friend, come up higher. He was taking the Pharisees and saying, Friend, you have overestimated your importance. Could you please give up this seat near the front, so that this leper can sit there? You see, in your life you have had plenty of good things, but this poor fellow hasn’t had much, and to be fair, we need to let him come up front for a while. So Jesus was humiliating the people who thought they were on top, and exalting the people who seemed to be on the bottom.

And frankly, it took the disciples a little while to catch on to this. They didn't seem to consider the fact that fishermen are not the most likely candidates for being honored at the royal banquet, and yet that is what Jesus was doing with them. They should not worry about being the greatest – they should instead be thankful that they are there at all. The rich and the famous were turning the invitation down, and the king was now sending his servants into the countryside to invite the lame, the blind, and the poor, and that's why *we* can be included. We are the lame and the blind that Jesus wants to be at his party.

Now, how would you like to be invited to a party of poor people, of lame people, of blind people, of people that everyone else looked down on? Attending this party is not going to help your social status one bit. And yet this is the kind of party Jesus is throwing. So Jesus is saying, if you are worried about who is the greatest, then you are not going to want to come to my party, because it's not about the greatest. If you think yourself worthy of greatness, then you are probably not going to come to my party at all. This party is not about status – it's about service. It's about helping other people.

Everyone is welcome to come to the party, Jesus says, but let me tell you what it's going to be like, and then you can decide whether you want to come. On one side is going to be Lazarus, a sick beggar who died at the gate of a rich man. On another side is going to be this old widow, who had only two copper coins to put into the offering. And over here is Zaccheus, who stole a lot of money and then gave it back. And there's Mary, who had a severe mental illness caused by demons. And there's the prodigal son who used to feed the pigs, and a bunch of other odd characters. It's a bunch of losers, and you are welcome to come, too, because you are a loser, too.

And the host of the party is the biggest loser. He was born in a stable and killed on a

cross. He's still got the nail marks in his hands, and he still seems to like shepherds and poor people. The local seminary kicked him out and his family said he was out of his mind. And if you go to *his* party, why would you worry about status?

If you want to be important at that kind of party, then you need to become like a little child, and *just be happy to be there*. That is, after all, what a party is supposed to be like. It's about having a good time, about enjoying life for all eternity – it's not about climbing social ladders.

So, if you have a Christmas party or go to a Christmas party, remember to be like a little child. Don't be childish in your thinking, but be like a child in your estimation of your own importance. Remember that the holiday is about Jesus as a little child – a baby, with no rights, no status in the world, no privileges. He came to help other people, because that's the way he is, and that's the way that his world operates, and that's the way that he wants us to operate, too. It's a children's party. [I could quit here if we were out of time.]

We see a similar thing in Mark, chapter 9, starting in verse 33:

³³ After they arrived at Capernaum and settled in a house, Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you discussing out on the road?” ³⁴ But they didn't answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve disciples over to him, and said, “Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.”

³⁶ Then he put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not only me but also my Father who sent me.”

It's a similar story, except this time, instead of saying that we must become as little

children, Jesus says, in verse 35, **“Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.”** The meaning is the same. If you want to have the highest status, then take the lowest status. *Not* because you will eventually be exalted, but because it is the right thing to do.

Yes, we will all eventually be exalted, but humility is not a game in which we sacrifice a little bit now in a calculated move to get more for ourselves later. That’s not real humility. No, if we are truly humble, then we are quite happy to *stay* in lower status. It’s like the apostle Paul said, We need to be content in whatever status we are in.

I think here of the patriarch Joseph, who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in Egypt. And instead of moaning about his miserable turn in life, he decided to be the best slave he could be. And when he was thrown into prison, he decided to be the best prisoner that he could be. And eventually things turned around for him, but even if they didn’t, he had done the right thing.

Now, what does “taking the last place” look like in practice? Jesus says in this verse that we must be the servant of everyone else. We need to be the best servant we can be, in the circumstances in which God has placed us. That’s what Jesus did. He was willing to become like a child for us. We need to be willing to be a child in our attitudes toward others.

If we have to think in terms of *status*, then this is how it works: When we deal with someone else, we need to treat them like they are higher status than we are, because that’s what Jesus has done for us. And when we come across someone who is truly low class, then we need to welcome them, because that’s what Jesus did for us, when we were really low class compared to him, and Jesus says that when we welcome them, we welcome him, too.

Jesus loves the little children, and he loves the people of low status, so much so that he became a little child himself, of low status. And he invites us to his party. He invites us not

because we deserve it, but because of his grace, as a *gift* – and the better we realize what a gift it is for us to be invited, that we don't deserve it, then the more willing we are to welcome other people who don't deserve it, either.

Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? It's Jesus, the little child. It's Jesus, who died on a cross. It's Jesus, who even now serves us in our needs. It's Jesus who lives in every man and woman, and children, too, as they serve other people. The greatest evangelist that we know about is the apostle Paul, and he said it well, "It's not me – it's Jesus living in me." That is humility, not as a pretense, but because it's true. Jesus gets the credit.

Jesus is really great, and his greatness is demonstrated in his love, in his willingness to serve, in his willingness to be a little child. May we all participate in that sort of greatness.

4115 words – 29 minutes