

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Romans 13:1-10

Matthew 18:1-20

One football player, when he scores a touchdown, gestures like Superman ripping open his shirt to reveal the “S” on his super-suit. Another football player, when he made a good play, rubbed his fingers together in the “money” gesture. Still another kisses one bicep and then the other. Football, like World Wrestling, is great theater. Tennis players touch the back of their ears after a good shot to get the crowd to roar their approval. In the NBA, flexing after a dunk is now passé. New and more compelling theatrics are always in demand. Gone are the workmanlike days of putting on your hardhat and doing what you are supposed to do without calling attention to yourself. Narcissism is en vogue and humility goes begging. Life in America is inverted.

I am the greatest of all time; so said Mohammad Ali. Who is greater, the one who drives up to the valet stand in a Bentley or the parking attendant wearing black trousers and a red vest? Who is greater, the Wall St. baron or the widow who gave out of her poverty, all that she had, two small (measly) copper coins (Mark 12:41-44)? Inquiring minds want to know: “Who is the greatest?” “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” (Matthew 18:1). The question hits Jesus’ ears like fingernails on a chalkboard. That question has religious manure baked into it. Greatness; do you know it when you see it? Jesus put a child in their midst. Become like this child, He said. “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4). A child is dependent. A child is powerless. Intuitively, a child knows that others must take care of him. “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Did you hear that? Do you take those words seriously?

Humility; it is the heartbeat of the Scripture. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:12). Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you (James 4:10). Who does God choose to bear His Son? God chooses a humble handmaiden, the blessed virgin, a young lass who is of no account in the world’s eyes. In thankful joy, Mary gives voice to God’s *modus operandi*: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant” (Luke 1:46ff.). The greatest Man was born in a stable and laid in a manger. Christ humbled Himself and was obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). Here’s the thing, humility can’t be forged. Humility is not a kabuki performance meant to entertain. Humility can’t be faked. Change is made within us at the deepest levels or it is not made at all. Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Ultimately, your pride or your humility is going to find its way to your neighbor. Arrogance treats one’s fellow man with contempt, as a thing to be used, as an instrument to gain satisfaction or power or some other personal benefit. Pride diminishes oneself and one’s neighbor. Humility will bless those near to you. You are utterly dependent on God. In love, He gave Himself up for you. Your need was extraordinary. Your need required death, a blood sacrifice, a ransom. The Lord of heaven and earth, the Greatest, became the least for you. Our sin... He took it. The

millstone of your wretchedness was hung round Jesus' neck and He was plunged in the depths of suffering, the depths of death. The Son of God did not consider equality with God a thing to be held onto but He offered Himself up to His Father (Philippians 2:6-7). In our humanity, in our poor mortal form, God suffered and died. You are entirely dependent upon this act of grace. You are entirely dependent on this loving Savior. You are entirely dependent on this living Lord. When you were baptized, you were washed in His blood. Your baptism changed you at the deepest level. St. Paul wrote this about you and your baptism: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life that I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Humility is alive in faith. Humility is alive in Christians. It will show in how you treat your neighbor – your neighbor is your spouse, your children, parents, co-workers, and the people who live next door.

Who is the greatest? The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the one needs support and nurture and grace. You live presently under the reign of Almighty God. You are to look at this world with His eyes, not the inverted eyes of sinful man, not the inverted eyes that value glamour and wealth and all things empty. "When you see a fellow disciple who is struggling or hurting or alone and in desperate need, at that moment you are seeing him who is the greatest in the reign of heaven" (Gibbs, Concordia Commentary Series, St. Matthew). Your pride or your humility will find its way to your neighbor. You bear Christ's name. If your faithless behavior causes a struggling disciple to fall, then you have caused one of Christ's little ones to sin. That is a scandal. Your neighbor needs you. If you are behaving callously toward those in your sphere of influence then you must repent.

Humility will not tempt others to sin. You died to sin, how can you live in it any longer? (Romans 6:2). Buried with Christ in holy baptism, you have been raised a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We Christians will not be a source of temptation for others – we will not. We protect others from greed. We protect others from lust. We protect others from covetousness. There are so many people who are getting the short end of the stick in our culture because the "greatest" are abusing them, taking advantage of them, pumping them full of rancid ideas. We, the church of Christ, we are the safe haven for the least, the last, the forgotten and the marginalized. We have the Gospel. The words of eternal life animate this holy house and those words are for everyone, those words *elevate* everyone. God treasures and values those who look nothing like the greatest. God chose what is foolish in this world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised to manifest His glory (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). The cross of Christ is never, ever going to change. That cross generates humility in believers and that is never, ever going to change.

This life is very much worth enjoying. I'm in an advantageous position. Do you know what I see? Regularly, do you know what I am privileged to see? Christ's humility; it is in you and I see the service that you provide for others. This world has its problems, to be sure. But I see Christ in action, in the lives of His disciples, and the humility and love and compassion for the least and the hurting is abundant. "As you did it to one the least of these my brethren, you do it for me" (Matthew 25:40). Our eyes are on the least for they are the greatest. What a beautiful truth, that as we serve others, we are serving Christ. As we are attentive to those the world forgets, we are serving the Lord who did not forget us. That is very much worth enjoying. Don't

let it slip your notice. Don't deprive yourself of the joy that comes from recognizing it, from the joy of *doing* it.

This day, Christ's humility finds its way to you. He did not come to be served but to serve, to give His life as a ransom for you (Matthew 20:28). He invites you to His table and gives you gifts that you can't find anywhere else, gifts that you could never procure for yourself. And He gives them to you freely, abundantly, without reservation. His humility has elevated the world. His life permeates this whole globe. His death is our exaltation. His resurrection is proof that God regards the low estate of sinners. Resurrection is what Christ the King serves you with. Jesus said: I am among you as one who serves (Luke 22:27). Take and eat of My humility and your soul will delight in the richest of fare (Isaiah 55). Take and drink of my sacrifice and you will receive the exaltation of My holiness. Surely you know how blessed you are!