

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2026

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Romans 13:1-10

Matthew 18:1-20

Propaganda – are you familiar with the word? Propaganda has become a word that is laden with negative connotations. Its original meaning was harmless. Propaganda comes from a Latin word which simply meant to spread something, to plant or to propagate. In horticulture, a plant spreads itself by dropping seeds – it isn't nefarious or duplicitous. The sun propagates energy and light and heat. The sun isn't spreading corruption. Propaganda, as a word, had its origin in the church in the 17th century. The church sent missionaries to spread the word, to proclaim Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. These missionary ventures were innocent, oriented toward the love of God as the church brought Good News to those who sat in darkness.

The word “propaganda” now implies the desire to control. The word “propaganda” implies interest in manipulating people, it implies the active distortion of reality to gain power over others. In Nazi Germany, Joseph Goebbels was the chief propagandist. His official title was the Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. He was a villain. He controlled all news, radio, film, theater, books and public information. He built a powerful “cult of personality” around Adolph Hitler. Goebbels spread antisemitism and justified Nazi aggression. Goebbels used propaganda to do this. And he was successful. How vulnerable are *we* to propaganda? Political, spiritual, sociological, commercial – there are different types of propaganda. I suspect that we are subject to the attempts of others to control our behavior or our thought patterns without us even being aware of it. Such a realization can be disconcerting. I don't like the idea of those in positions of influence attempting to control me. I don't like my sinful nature manipulating me. I don't like the demonic exerting influence over me.

There's a corrective. Thanks be to God; the Holy Spirit directs my heart and mind. Thanks be to God; the Scripture provides direction. I suggest to you that the disciples had been propagandized. Their question betrays their frame of mind. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1). It's not a good question. Its premise defies Christ's teaching. The question could be asked another way, equally bad. “Who should we regard?” Isn't that what they're asking? The converse of the question is in the shadows, but it's there. Who may we disregard? The fallen world had propagandized these men. At some point, the disciples had ingested the idea that the great are to be valued and the not-so-great are to be forgotten. Is that what you think? Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? The question hits Jesus ears like fingernails on a chalkboard. The question has religious manure and worldly propaganda baked into it. Jesus corrected them, and He corrects us. A child; Jesus puts a child, the emblem of the forgotten, in their midst and the Lord reorients their minds.

“Truly, I say to you, 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? Those words aren't being spoken to someone else. Those words are being spoken to you. Who do you regard and why do you regard them? Let's start with a history lesson. Whom did God choose to bear His Son? A princess? An influencer? Was Mary the emblem of success and prosperity, or was she a different sort? God chose a humble handmaiden, inconsequential to the world's eyes.

Listen to Mary the theologian: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden” (Luke 1:46-55 ~ The Magnificat). More history: The Greatest was born in a stable and laid in manger (Luke 2:1-12). Still more history: Christ humbled Himself and was obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). It’s not propaganda. It’s the Gospel. Does the Gospel tell you who to regard? Does the Gospel reorient your heart to see those around you as Christ sees them?

Why should you become like a child? Maybe Jesus was just looking for a catchy line, a linguistic jolt just to make the disciples think. Maybe Jesus was pushing the point beyond reasonableness just to stir the pot. Because if Jesus was really serious this is what it would mean – it would mean that the greatest in His kingdom are those who are the neediest, those who are utterly dependent upon Him. No, it can’t be that. It can’t be that those who are the greatest in His kingdom are those who depend on God for everything, who realize that they have nothing and that God offers everything. It can’t be that greatness is something that God confers on the lowly. It can’t be that Jesus is redefining greatness in the reign of heaven, a reign that now breaks into this world. Or can it? The troubled and the weak and the struggling are the greatest? Yes, exactly! That is *precisely* who Jesus wants us to regard. The question is, can you? Or have you been so thoroughly propagandized that you are incapable of seeing those who are great?

God does not want to lose *any*. The Father’s will is that *not a single one* of His little ones should be lost. God wrathful justice is aroused if any of His children should be scandalized, put at risk. Jesus’ teaching is unmistakable: the littlest ones must not be forgotten, because God treasures them, values them. The question is, do you? You’ve been propagandized not to. The world and your sinful flesh tell you to ignore them for they are inconsequential. That is the world trying to control you, gain power over you because the world hates Christ and His kingdom, the world is interested in advancing its own theology – the least serve the greatest, the weak serve the powerful, the poor serve the rich. You could go along with it. You could hold onto this theological slop. You could hold onto familiar sinful habits, easy sinful choices, seductively sinful relationships but what will be the consequence on the last Day for an unrepentant heart? Jesus asked this question: “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

Here’s the truth: There is no one in greater need than you. Your need has been extraordinary. Your need required death, a blood sacrifice, a ransom – and you couldn’t pay. So, the Greatest became Least for you. The millstone of your sin was hung ‘round Christ’s neck and He was plunged into the depth of suffering. The Son of the Living God was nailed to a cross and died because you were in need. There is no one who has been in greater need than you. And God saw you, His little one. And He sent His Son. Into our poor, mortal form, God sent His Son. For no other reason than the fact that you were in need, God sent His Son. The Lord Christ viewed you as the Greatest and He poured out His life to save you. You are entirely dependent upon His grace. You will forever be entirely dependent upon His grace. Learn it; savor it; reject the world’s propaganda and embrace the Gospel for it will help you see the least among us properly. When you were baptized, you were washed in Jesus’ blood. As a child you were baptized (no matter how old you were), a child of our heavenly Father who received His grace. You were changed (2 Corinthians 5:17). You are not of this world (John 17:14-16). Why cling to the propaganda of this world? God treasures those who look nothing like the greatest.

Here's the wonder of Christ's ministry: He hides Himself in the least and affords you an opportunity to see Him there, to bless Him there, to manifest to others who you truly are. He said: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you do it to me" (Matthew 25:40). You won't if the world's propaganda has its way with you. You won't see the least, you won't serve the least, you won't manifest who you are in Christ to the least. We renounce it, the world's propaganda. As we renounce Satan and all his works and all his ways, so do we renounce his propaganda. This day Christ's ministry, Christ's humility, Christ's kingdom finds its way to you. He invites you to His table. He invites the struggling and the hurting and those in desperate need of forgiveness. Those are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. To the lowly, our King says this: Take and eat of My humility and your soul will delight in the richest of fare (Isaiah 55:2). Take and drink of My sacrifice and you will receive the exaltation of my death and resurrection (Luke 1:52). That is the truth that sets us free from propaganda (John 8:32).