

PENTECOST 14, A – September 6, 2020  
SCRIPTURES – Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:1-10; Matthew 18:1-20

[Jesus said:] *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”* Matt. 18

**Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.** LSB 649:1

This hymn expresses a beautiful sentiment. Does it express an accurate sentiment? Are our hearts bound in Christian love? Do we have “kindred minds;” minds that are akin, that are bound together as one?

I ask this because we are constantly making evaluations and comparisons. Now, this is not necessarily bad. For instance, when a child is born an evaluation – called an Apgar test – is immediately made. The baby is evaluated to see whether or not medical intervention and care is needed. This is a good thing. But, our comparisons and evaluations do not always come from good intentions and are not always for good purposes. No, they are often done to exalt one person – usually yourself – over another. They end up dividing. Jesus saw this in His disciples’ seemingly innocent question, **“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”** He was therefore very blunt with His answer.

Jesus called to Him a child – probably very young – and set him before His disciples. **“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”** Their jaws must have dropped in amazement. A child? The greatest? How could this be?

- The 30 best golfers in the world are in Atlanta right now, competing for their Tour Championship. Imagine presenting there as the golfer with the best swing... not one of them... not Tiger Woods... but Charles Barkley. He’s lucky if he doesn’t miss the ball completely!



In Jesus’ day a child – and especially one who was very young – would not be held up as an example to emulate; and never as an example of greatness. He hadn’t done anything great yet! He couldn’t, for children were small and weak and susceptible to sickness. They had to grow stronger. They didn’t clearly know right from wrong, good

from bad. They were utterly dependent upon their parents for everything! Sure, children were loved and valued, but it was for their potential, for what they could become after years of learning and training. How shocking it was for Jesus to call a helpless little child the greatest in God's kingdom! How unbelievable to hear Him say, ***“Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*** How utterly contrary to how people thought; to how we still think! Jesus is not only forbidding comparisons and thoughts of greatness; He makes God sound like a tyrant who rejects all that we do! I mean, if, to enter God's kingdom, you must be like a little child, utterly needy and dependent and without resources, then doesn't this mean that all that you have done or could do is worthless?

God isn't a tyrant. He does see clearly, however. The problem is not God; it is us. We don't truly and selflessly love Him and trust Him; not even the best of us, such as Jesus' 12 disciples. They were with Him day after day. They saw His great power to heal and save. When they had little food, He blessed it and provided food in abundance. When they were in a boat and were threatened by a sudden storm, He silenced it and kept them safe. They knew, better than any of us know, that with Him they had every blessing of God! And yet, they still compared themselves with others. They still evaluated and wondered: ***“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”*** Do not think that you're any better! Not one of us is. We do not truly and selflessly love Him and trust Him. We look critically upon others, even our fellow Christians, and are quick to see their failings. We do not do one thing as Jesus did: without thought of self, but simply because it pleases our good God and helps others. Evaluate... compare... worry about status. Give in to these things and your heart will not be bound to others, or to God, in love.

Our only hope of being bound to God, of having His love and blessing, is to be children: utterly dependent, and happily so; trusting not in anything we do but solely in Him because He is a good Father who binds Himself to us and gladly cares for His needy children. This is the God you have in Jesus: a God who loves you completely and endlessly, before you could do anything good, or anything at all; and so, a God whose love is not dependent upon what you do. He is a God who, although He knows your sins, does not desire to cut you off for them, not even a hand or a foot, but who instead takes the responsibility for them Himself and cuts Himself off on account of them. Jesus, by His bearing your sins and dying for you on the cross, is the complete forgiveness of your sins. You do not need to make up for any of them. Jesus has done so! Our God in Jesus is a loving Father who, like a good parent, teaches and guides and disciplines, that His children might not only know what is good but desire it. He gives us His good Word to guide us in all of our ways. He also goes beyond the best of us parents, for by His Word He fills us with His Holy Spirit, that His good desires might be ours. Utter dependence upon such a God... a dependence that listens to His Word and follows it, and not oneself... a dependence that trusts Him completely, and in all things: such dependence – the utter dependence of a child – is truly great, for it acknowledges Him as truly great.

Be a child, utterly dependent upon your Lord, and He will bring forth great things from you; for He will make you to be like Him. He will especially direct you to those who, like children, are weak and in need; who even, because of their need, may make things more difficult for you. Do you utterly trust in and depend upon God? Show this by, when you are sinned against – and who is not? – not sitting and stewing in anger... or planning how to get back... but in going to the one who sinned against you and seeking to be reconciled. ***“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone,”*** Jesus says. ***“If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”*** You can do this difficult work when you know that God is with you and will take care of you. He will help you to not worry about being great but be content to take the lower place! But, really, it is not a low place at all. It is the place of Christ and His cross. Jesus says: ***“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”*** You are dealing with Jesus when you show mercy to others. You are in the company of their angels, who are always looking upon the face of the Father who is in heaven. By Himself taking the lowest place upon the cross Jesus exalts the low place, and those who are in it! He exalts them to be vessels of His mercy.

The day will come when there will no longer be such a need; when, as the last verse of our hymn says,

**From sorrow, toil, and pain, and sin we shall be free  
And perfect love and friendship reign through all eternity.** LSB 649:5

Until that day, humble yourself and be a needy child of your Lord Jesus. He will take care of you, and make you glad in His work! In the blessed name of Jesus. Amen.