



Who Is the Greatest in God's Kingdom?

TEXT
Matthew 18:1–5;
19:13–15

November 19, 2017 — Sermon by Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka

M*atthew 18:1–5: At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus 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.”*

Matthew 19:13–15: Then little children were being brought to Jesus in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

These are two stories about Jesus and his interaction with children. In the first story, the disciples are debating among themselves. They hear Jesus talk about the kingdom of heaven, and they understand,

as did most Jews of the day, that the Messiah was going to overthrow the Roman occupiers and restore the kingdom of Israel. They thought that Jesus was going to be the new king of Israel, and they wanted to find out how each of them would rank in the new kingdom. Who would be the greatest? Jesus astounds and confounds them by taking a child and placing the child among them and telling them that unless they become like this child, they will never enter or be a part of the kingdom.

Then later, Jesus is meeting with women and men who are seeking healing and blessing. Some parents bring their children to Jesus, and the disciples scold these parents. They see blessing children as a waste of time. Jesus again astounds and confounds the disciples. He tells them to let the children come to him because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

It sounds odd to our 21st century ears that the disciples would turn away children, but it would make sense in the world of Jesus' day. Professor Bruce Malina, in his book *The New Testament World, Insights from Cultural Anthropology*,

reminds us that in Jesus' day, children were viewed as inferior members of the society. Nearly half of all children born did not live to be five years old. Newborns were viewed as having so little worth that an infant could be abandoned without penalty.

In Jewish society, it was only when children reached 13 years old that they were viewed as human beings. Until then, they were viewed as a nonperson, more of a burden. In Roman society, slaves were of more value than children because they could be productive. Even among the elite and educated, as soon as a child was born, the child was given over to a nursemaid to raise. They were not worthy of a parent's attention. The parents had little to do with them until they became an adult — if they became an adult.

So it is astounding and confounding that when the disciples ask about who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus takes a child, places that child among them and says they should be like this child to be part of the kingdom. Then Jesus says, “Anyone who welcomes a child like this welcomes me.” And when

the disciples turn away some parents who are bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus, Jesus tells his disciples to let the children come to him, because “it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

Dr. Robin Maas has written about these words of Jesus. Jesus seems to be saying that the kingdom of heaven *belongs* to children, and she can find no other place in scripture where the kingdom of heaven is said to belong to anyone except right here. Of course in a number of places, it says we belong to God, and by God’s grace we belong in the kingdom of heaven — but it is only to children that the kingdom of heaven belongs. She believes this is because children seem to get God in a way that we do not.

When I was on the faculty at Columbia Theological Seminary, I taught with Professor Kathy Dawson, who specializes in faith formation with children. On Sundays, she teaches a children’s class at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church there in Decatur.

One Sunday, after she taught the Bible story, one of her most active little guys, De’andre, instead of going to play, went to a table and got a piece of paper and started to draw. Kathy was surprised and sat down next to him. “De’andre,” she asked, “What are you drawing?”

“It’s a picture of God,” he said.

“Oh,” said Kathy. “Well, you know, no one knows what God looks like.”

“They will in a minute,” said De’andre.

I cannot explain this, but not everything in the reign of God can be or needs to be explained.

Karen is pastor of a church in Little Rock. She and her husband Doug were blessed with Sarah Lynn. Sarah Lynn, from the start, was bright and an early talker. She ruled the house. So it was a surprise to Sarah when Karen and Doug explained to her that she was going to be a big sister.

Madison Grace was born when Sarah was almost 4 years old. Karen and Doug did everything they could to help Sarah accept her new role and to accept her little sister into their family. But they were concerned when one night Sarah insisted that both her parents leave the living room because she needed to talk to her newborn little sister alone.

Karen and Doug protested, but Sarah Lynn was insistent. Eventually, the parents agreed to stand just outside the living room in an alcove. It was then that they heard Sarah whisper to her little sister, “Quick. I’m starting to forget. Tell me again what God looks like.” Doug and Karen both gasped, and before they could come back into the living room to sweep up their daughters in hugs, they heard Sarah say after a few moments, “Oh yeah. Thank you.”

Jesus says uniquely, the kingdom of heaven belongs to children. Children own the kingdom of heaven. Children get God in ways that we do

not. We need them to remind us who God is and what the kingdom of heaven is like.

That is why I believe it is a travesty that today nearly 22,000 children around the world will die of hunger and disease and abuse. Nearly one billion children will go to bed hungry today — fifteen million of them here in the United States. It is an indictment upon us all that we spend more money on weapons than on food for our children. If everyone in the world had enough food to eat, we would not need to spend money on weapons.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to children because they seem to get God in ways that we do not. We need our children to remind us who God is and what the kingdom of heaven is like.

On September 11, 2001, when 2,606 persons lost their lives in the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, one of them who died was David, husband to Catherine and father to 5-year-old Max, members of the Presbyterian Church in Tenafly, New Jersey. Max had been baptized in that church and that congregation had taken the same vows we do every time we baptize a child. We promise to guide and nurture by word and deed with love and prayer each child and to encourage them to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of his church.

Three years ago, when Max was getting ready to go to college, he asked the pastor, the Rev. Dr. Eileen Lindner, if he

could have a moment to speak to the congregation.

Max got up and said he wanted to say thank you to the church for loving his mom and for loving him and helping to raise him. Then he looked out over that congregation and said, “Thank you, Mr. Dale, for coming over on Saturdays and fixing things at our house and showing me how to replace pipes.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wellton,” for showing me how to make pancakes and bacon so I could serve Mom breakfast for her birthday.

“Thank you, Mr. O’Kinnon, for coming over and showing me how to tie a tie before my junior prom.”

“Thank you, Mr. Park, for having the courage to let me drive your car with you so I could get my driver’s license. Thank you everyone for coming to my cross country meets and swim meets and my concerts and high school graduation. Most of all, thank you for helping me remember my Dad. You are all my Dads.

Today, at our 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. services, we baptized 16 children. We made promises to Piper Erin, Oakleigh Henry, Nolan Thorne, Anna Cate, Avery Jade, Delaney May, Paige Amelia, Bridget Cathleen, Kellen William, Claire Elizabeth, Eleanor Grace, Finley Nell, Graham Allen, Cecilia Allison, Abigail Lottie, and Jackson Jeffery. We promised to help each of them know Jesus and to follow him — and we promised to help them know what it means to be part of the church.

You promised. You promised. You promised. You promised these children and all God’s children — for these are the greatest in God’s kingdom, and it is to such as these that God’s kingdom belongs.

Keep your promise!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Spirit. Amen!

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.