

Little Ones

Preached on Trinity XXII
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ, Vermont
Nov. 8, 2020
Text: Matt. 18: 7-20

The gospel passage we are looking at shows Jesus's great concern for those He calls "the little ones." The "little ones" Jesus is talking about can certainly be children; but they can also be those who are young in the faith and vulnerable. Like children, these people do not count themselves great; rather, they realize their need and come to God with the empty hands of faith. They are often not trying to stand out, but to hide behind the more mature ones in the Christian community. They are our brothers and sisters, and they require our special care.

But they can only be adequately cared for if we get out of our own way. True disciples must actually diminish their self-focus and become those who put others first. This does not come naturally. Hence, the passage a little before today's reading:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1)

The disciples are all-too-human, aren't they? They are looking for the organizational chart that will tell them about rank and status. "Who is the top dog? Where do I fit into the hierarchy?" These questions are driven by others which might not be expressed, but reveal the condition of the disciples' hearts, and the majority of humankind. "Am I significant?" "Is my worth secure?" These are very human questions and come from deep inside us. We all have a deep— though often inarticulate—desire to be valued. And if we believe that we are not valued, all sorts of suffering and pathology, even violence, can come bubbling up. We want to matter.

But the world of pop-psychology tells us that we are somehow to generate our worth and significance from within. That really becomes our job, and we have to take it seriously. We must say to ourselves: "Of course I am important! Of course I'm in charge!" "Of course people should take me seriously!" As our prophets of self-love would

assert, everything from poor grades to substance abuse to being a mass-murderer would disappear if only everyone had enough self-esteem.

Jesus, unfortunately, didn't seem to get that memo. Nowhere in the gospels does He say that people need to love themselves more, or that peoples' low self-esteem is the root of all evil. On the contrary, he takes it for granted that self-love is very much alive in all of us. He says that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, but this assumes, of course, that we already love ourselves. In saying this, He is not being an innovator or expressing some radical new insight. He is repeating what is found in Leviticus 19, verse 18, which says to love your neighbor as yourself.

To make matters worse, St. Paul, in Philippians 2, wants us to be humble and not toot our own horns.

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. (Philippians 2: 3)

This instruction seems downright harmful to the modern regime of self-praise. But there you have it. For Jesus and St. Paul, self-love is not something we all need more of. This places them quite out of step with the modern world, as it did the ancient. If you want to become dear to God, they tell us, make yourself small.

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and 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, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (18: 2-4)

You see, the community Jesus brought into existence, and Paul tried to build up, is not one that operates according to the world's understanding. It is the community of the children of God and operates by His rather odd rules. He has a tendency to turn the world's scheme of values, and even its "common sense", upside down. "The first will be last." "He that would save his life shall lose it." "If you want to truly live you must first die." None of this makes much sense to the worldly person. But the Church was, and still is, countercultural in many ways. It tells us to become as little children, to exhibit that trust and dependence on God that adults can find so difficult. It tells us to receive children and nurture them with patience, because that is how God treats us. It tells us to receive the

poor and downtrodden, who, like children, do not hold high status. We are to help the beggar because, as St. Augustine pointed out, we are all beggars in relation to God. We are to receive the broken, those whom the world believes to be unworthy of investment, and we are to do it graciously, letting them know that they are valued. If a church will not receive children and the poor, it is on the way to extinction as a church. It may still continue to exist, but it will become primarily a social club of the self-satisfied and clannish. It will have no place for “needy people.”

The True Church, however, is built of those who are humble enough to realize their utter dependence on the grace of God. Status seeking really has no place there. When, by the grace of God, people come to see their sin for what it is, and see their inadequacy in overcoming it, at that point they are ready to become disciples. They have been brought low and suffered humiliation in recognizing their situation. Without the resulting humility, we will never find our way to being one of Jesus’s “little ones,” let alone grow into maturity. For we will not be able to approach God in the proper way. Children, because they depend on others for their very existence, cannot help but live by humility. The task for us as disciples of Jesus is to return to that same humility.

All that being said, Christianity is realistic about the desires of people for status, recognition, power, and control that undermine the mission of the Church and often damage peoples’ faith. That is why Jesus assures us that stumbling blocks will exist within the Church and will cause all sorts of mischief. The Kingdom has indeed come, but it takes time and patience and loving correction to lessen the hold of worldly habits within the Church. Sometimes a person will even have to be disciplined or removed because he is causing others to stumble. If a person does not repent of his action, even when approached repeatedly by concerned members of the body, he may have to be removed from fellowship. He may be the hand that has to be cut off and cast away. This is a sad reality, but God takes the care of His “little ones” very seriously. Those who place a stumbling block before these fragile souls would be better off being thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck.

Everyone has a part to play in God's Church, and all of the parts are important. It is when people begin to think that their agenda should eclipse everyone else's that trouble starts. The famous discussion of St. Paul in 1st Corinthians makes this point well:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many...If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose...The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable...God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Cor. 12:14-25)

When people within the Church choose their own vision and desire for control over putting others first, they will become stumbling blocks and cause others to fall. Both Jesus and Paul are trying to teach us that we in the Church need each other in order to be whole. We are all stronger spiritually when everyone's spiritual growth is taken seriously. We must be a community that in no way places stumbling blocks in the way of those sincerely desiring to follow Jesus.

Without dying to self and its agenda, without leaving behind the vision I have for "My Church," none of us can really do the work God has called us to. Jesus has used the dramatic imagery of cutting off hands and feet to bring home the point to his disciples that how they live together is crucial for the salvation that He has paid for so dearly. The church that is just a collection of individuals on their own customized spiritual program will not really function effectively as Christ's body in the world. They have not learned to serve and care for each other. How in the world will they reach out to others in need? These are those lost sheep Jesus speaks of.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the model for all of us. Now we must all be shepherds of one another. Jesus left the ninety-nine to go in search of the one who had gone astray—in other words, you and me. So, like Him, we must seek the weak and

vulnerable, because it is the will of the Father in Heaven that not one of these little ones should be lost.

With all the things vying for our attention, it is still of supreme importance to care for the one who is lost, or just needs a sympathetic ear. As God has done for us, so we are to do for others. This really is a key task of grateful disciples, for they know that without God's grace, we are all lost. We are to be grace-givers to others because we are to be Christ to others, as far as we are able.

The parable of the lost sheep is not about us; it is about God's unrelenting love for wayward humanity. We are all those little sheep, helpless and vulnerable to the powers arrayed against us. Jesus with His love, His patience with our spiritual blindness, and His meeting people where they are, embodies God's fierce desire to have all of us, His little ones, cared for. Just as God refuses to abandon them, neither can we.