

Sermon for Pentecost 12 (Proper 18) A – September 4, 2011
Ezekiel 33:7-9; Matthew 18:1-20

Just a few verses before today's Gospel reading, Jesus said to His disciples, "*The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.*" Think about that. What kind of response would you think the disciples would have to Jesus saying something like that? Now, I don't know about you, but I would be expecting the disciples to be asking questions about when, where, how, and why these things should happen. You would think that the disciples would be interested in the topic that Jesus placed before them - His upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. You would think they would have questions about that. That's what you would think, but that's not what they asked.

Instead, they have a question that is totally off topic. Jesus is talking about the cross and suffering and the disciples completely ignore him to ask questions about more glorious things (just like many people are turned off by preaching that focuses on the cross instead of glory). Matthew tells us: *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"* Excuse me! Jesus has been pouring out His soul to His disciples concerning His upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection, and their question is, "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" ... Don't you just want to tell the disciples that their priorities are a little out of whack?

Before we criticize the disciples, we need to check ourselves. How often do our priorities get out of whack? How often do we seek the things of this world instead of the things of God? How often are other things far more important to us than hearing the Word of God and receiving communion? How often would we rather hear something more pleasing to our glory-seeking sinful nature than have to hear the Word of the Lord? How often do we just flat-out ignore Jesus so we can go on thinking and doing whatever we want instead of listening to Him?

Jesus has an answer for His disciples. Are you all worried about "who is the greatest"? Jesus chose a most unusual object lesson for His disciples. He called a child and stood that child among them. Then 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.*" This teaching would have shocked the disciples. While first century parents certainly loved and cherished their children, children were certainly not role models for adults. Children were physically weak, foolish, and susceptible to disease. Children need food and clothing. Children are helpless and dependent. If no one cares for them, they will die. For these reasons, while children were loved, the culture of that day thought children were inferior to adults. You weren't considered a valuable member of society until you were an adult.

Jesus used this child - someone that the culture thought was inferior - to teach the disciples, and us, that the reign of heaven is for the vulnerable - the helpless - the dependent. Jesus is teaching repentance. Repentance is that turn that we make away from ourselves and toward God. We abandon our sinful and futile ways of thinking and seeing ourselves and the world and allow our minds to be conformed to the Word of God instead. We turn from sin to confession and forgiveness, from death to life. That's what repentance is. Repentance begins as the Holy Spirit uses the law to show our sin to us along with the punishment it deserves. When we see that we are helpless to do anything about our sinful condition, the Holy Spirit gives us faith to depend on God for the solution to our sin.

A beloved child does not worry about being helpless, but looks to parents for the answer. So also the child of God - even though he knows he is spiritually helpless - does not worry, but looks to God. Jesus taught that repentance admits the helpless dependence of a child who must look to others in order to survive. Jesus teaches that those who insist that they are not helpless sinners will never enter the kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, those who are helpless, dependent sinners are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

After Jesus explained who is truly greatest in the kingdom of heaven, He went on to explain His intense desire to protect them from evil. He issued a stern warning to those who would teach false doctrine to these little ones. Jesus said, *"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."* There is a horrible punishment for those who promote false doctrines - a punishment that is worse than drowning in the depths of the sea. Many people in our day may not take the doctrine, the teaching of the Bible, seriously, but God does and so do those who believe in Him. His doctrine is eternal life and false doctrine is eternal death, and that is why what we teach and what we believe is important. It matters. And God gives it as a gift.

Jesus expressed His desire to protect His children from sin and false doctrine in another way. In our day and age we have another name for this way. We call it tough love. Jesus is very concerned when one of His precious ones wanders into spiritual danger. At first, He expressed His concern with a parable of the lost sheep. This parable is very comforting for those us whom Jesus has rescued. On the other hand, this parable quickly becomes uncomfortable when we see how Jesus instructs us to be His church in this world. There is a very good reason that we often call this tough love.

Jesus begins by saying, *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."* When Jesus ends this sentence with the words: *"you have gained your brother,"* He is basically saying that the sin involved is the kind that might cause a brother to be lost. When our brother sins in such a way that we fear he is putting his faith in danger, we who love him must act. This is very uncomfortable, but the alternative is to do nothing just so that we can get along and not ruffle and feathers. I wonder how many people will stand at the gates of hell and ask, "Why didn't someone in the church love me enough to tell me I was in danger of coming here?" The hope here is that the brother will see his error and confess saying something like, "You know, I had forgotten what God's word says. I have sinned. Please forgive me." Then all of heaven rejoices over the helpless sinner who repents - over this greatest one who has been gained back into the kingdom.

Jesus then describes the next step: *"But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses."* Unfortunately, people can reject God's Word. I have heard people say, "I disagree with that," after hearing a reading from the Bible. It is possible that the presence of a few other Christians will cause this person to rethink his resistance and repent. Once again, if the brother repents, there is rejoicing in heaven.

Jesus describes one more step: *"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."* If this person continues to reject the Word of God, then those who are involved must consider the

reality of that rejection. It is possible that this person does not consider himself helpless and dependent on God. If it becomes abundantly clear and certain that this person refuses to repent, then the issue must come to the church. Even then, there is the hope that the circumstances will cause this person to repent so that the heavens will rejoice. If, on the other hand, the person's heart remains hard, the church in loving sorrow, must remove the person from the assembly.

This process must never be done lightly. It must always be done in the context of Jesus' teaching that the one who is a helpless, dependent sinner who relies completely on God's grace alone is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Through it all, the hope is that the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of the unrepentant people and help them understand their helpless dependence on God and so come to repentance.

The world today puts an incredible amount of pressure on people to get along at all costs. We think it is just better to let people "do their own thing" rather than risk upsetting someone. Nevertheless, when a person's soul is at stake, we cannot surrender to the pressure of the world. As God told Ezekiel in today's Old Testament lesson, *"If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul."* If I don't warn the one gone astray, then the blood is on my hands.

Jesus endured the cross for all people - even those who harden their hearts. Although Jesus is both God and the only man who never sinned, He took the shame of our sin onto Himself. This is the way that He earned salvation for all helpless sinners. Not only did Jesus die to take away our sins, but we know that the promise of forgiveness is true for we have the sign of the resurrection. Jesus did not remain in the tomb, but God raised Him from the dead.

Today's Gospel ends with a word of comfort: *"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."* We know that Jesus is indeed in all places for He is both God and man. Nevertheless, He does not reveal Himself in all places. As we come to the end of today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that He reveals Himself wherever people gather in His name, and here He is speaking of the assembly of believers who gather to hear His Word. He promised to send the Holy Spirit who reveals Jesus in preaching and His Word, in water and His Word, and in bread and wine, and His Word. As the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us in His service, Jesus gives us His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, for He is truly here in our midst, giving out His gifts to His children. Amen.