

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

**Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

**September 9, 2020**

### **Psalm: Psalm 32:1–7**

**1** Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

**2** Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

**3** For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

**4** For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

**5** I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not cover my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"  
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

**6** Therefore let everyone who is godly  
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;  
surely in the rush of great waters,  
they shall not reach him.

**7** You are a hiding place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

### **Old Testament Reading: Ezekiel 33:7–9**

**7** "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. **8** 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. 9 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.

### **EPISTLE: Romans 13:1–10**

**13** Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **3** For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, **4** for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. **6** For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. **7** Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

**8** Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. **9** For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **10** Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

### **THE GOSPEL: Matthew 18:1–20**

**18** At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" **2** And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them **3** and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **4** Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**5** "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, **6** 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.

**7** "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! **8** And if your hand or your foot

causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. **9** And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

**10** “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. **12** What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? **13** And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. **14** So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

**15** “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. **16** 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. **17** 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. **18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. **19** Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

## **Sermon 34 – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Matthew 18:1-20**

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is way too long, but there's a reason for that. Jesus has one very important point that He keeps returning to throughout this entire chapter. This point is found very quickly and it serves as a basis for a number of sub-points that He makes throughout the Gospel lesson.

**At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'**” This is not the first or second time this question is asked throughout the Gospels, and, frankly, even to this day it just befuddles me. Why in the world would the disciples even think

about that question, let alone have the misplaced courage to ask it? I mean, are they like five years old? It's one of the mysteries in the Bible. We tend to show the disciples respect for being the founders of our church, but sometimes we forget that they were men who were just as petty, childish, and full of sin as we can be. Jesus, though, comes to the point with His usual flair: **“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 is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”**

Wham. This statement about humility is the center of this enormous Gospel lesson. Jesus takes the most clear example of humility He can find, a little child. Why is this so? A child is completely dependant upon His parents, he has no way to meet his own needs. A toddler can't work to feed himself, get a mortgage, find a home, and so forth. Mom and dad have to do that stuff for him. The disciples are hung up on being top dog, and Jesus points to a little kid and says, “that's what you need to aspire to.”

Jesus does one of his classic reversals here. The disciples are looking for greatness on their terms, their ideas of what makes a person great. Jesus shows them true greatness: Weakness, humility, and dependence. These are what make a Christian great. Just like a child depends on mom and dad for everything, we depend on Jesus for everything. Without rain, there is no food, no water, no life, and we don't control the weather. God does. Without all the little things in our bodies working right, we'd die in a finger snap. Finally, without forgiveness, we're done for. Our sin is too much a part of us, we can't fix it on our own. We depend on Jesus to come down and fix it for us, which He has done. That's why Jesus holds up a child as the pinnacle of what a

Christian should aspire to be. We aspire not to be independent of God but to remember how much we need from God.

Everything else in the Gospel lesson revolves around this. That a Christian is not someone who has it all together, who's powerful or in charge. A Christian is a poor, down-and-out sucker who knows he's a poor, down-and-out sucker, who knows that he has nothing to offer God, who knows that he depends on God for everything.

Jesus tells us why: **“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better for you to enter life crippled and lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. Is it better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”** Jesus uses these extreme terms to show you how deep sin goes, how hard it is to fight, and some of the things that we have to do to keep ourselves from sinning. You can't get sin out of you. You can't. You can fight it, and you darn well should fight it if you want to call yourself Christian, but it won't go away. Those voices will keep whispering in your head, those feelings will keep squeezing your heart, and you're going to do things and say things that you will regret. All of that comes from within, and right up until the day you die, you will betray yourself, betray your Lord Jesus, and you will hurt your neighbor and damn yourself to hell. That is our greatest need from Jesus, payment for our wrongs, a fix for our brokenness, a way out of this fate that we've all earned for ourselves. That's why Jesus holds up this child. Christians are first and foremost people who receive gifts from God, gifts they don't deserve.

So that's what you do with this for Christians. What about for the church? I want you all to think real hard about what Jesus says when you think about church. If a little child is our role model as Christians, if being Christian is not about being impressive but being humble, what does that mean for us as church?

It means the same. There is a big fixation in America over big churches, "growing" churches, churches that are really something to look at, and I'm not just talking about the building. The building is beside the point. It is even more poignant during the age when getting the most basic thing done may mean violating health recommendations and common sense. How do you church when meeting is a risk? How we do preach when talking spreads a deadly illness? How do you teach when putting people in the same room is foolishness?

Moreover, how do you adhere to the truth when there are so many screamed examples of it? We know God's truth, it is fair and clear enough, but much of the world is wrestling with a much less substantial kind of truth. The truth of how best to do things here. God gives us some guidance on that score, but not a lot of particulars. It's still truth, it's still morality that's being discussed today, but it has too many layers of falsehood, irrelevance, and self-interest to work out easily. My point is, we as Christians are forced, by our doctrine, to engage in a discussion that not a great many people care to even consider, which is part of what makes this so awkward. We're adjacent to the issue, but not central to it.

If you've been thinking this, I want you to think about the example of this child that Jesus holds up. **"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.”** Looking impressive, big numbers, big programs, whatever... Jesus isn't looking at that. He judges people, He judges churches, He judges US, not based on what we've done, not based on how big or impressive we are, He judges us based on our repentance. On how we come to Him and say, “no, we don't have nothing, forgive us, Jesus.”

Going on the other point I made, we want to be in on the act. There's questions of civility, morality, and justice out there, and it makes sense that Christians should be a part of those discussions. Whether you as individuals have anything to say on these issues depends entirely on you, I'm not commanding you to go either way on this, but I know the imperative is there and the helplessness is there too. Too much of what Christianity as a belief system has to say on this is reductively simple and just about as useless in the eyes of the world: Humans are sinners. Sinners cause pain, injustice, exploitative systems, and abuse of power. We should *all*, therefore repent. That's about it as far as the faith is concerned. That's the most meaningful thing we have to contribute, and the world sees that as something that has no value. We have a faith that speaks to eternity as much as it speaks to the present, a faith that is willing to admit that it has no long-term solutions to human problems beyond the need for repentance and Christ's forgiveness.

God looks at the heart, not the skin, and what God looks for is not holiness, it's not power, it is NEED. And we have great need of God's help, because we are all wretched with sin and need it washed clean.

Do we want people to come to church? Of course we do. Our sins are forgiven, and we want others to enjoy that same forgiveness. But watch your hearts. Our call is not to be kings but

children, dependent on God, and what looks pathetic to human beings is exactly what God wants from His church, from you.

Amen