

O, to be a Child

Grace and peace are yours from Jesus your Lord and Savior, Amen.

Do remember grade school? For some of you, it was just like it was yesterday... for others, it literally was yesterday (or the day before). Certainly, there are lots of things to remember about grade school – but I want you to specifically think about the 30 seconds just before recess. You watched that secondhand creep by the 6, move like molasses past the 7, slow down just to get over the 8... until it arrived upon the 12. Finally, that beautiful bell rang out and... do recall what happened next?

I have a special memory of that glorious moment: the bell rang, and I darted from my seat like I was shot out of a cannon. I was the first one to the door, and everyone had to line up behind me until the teacher said we could go. After weeks of trying to get that #1 spot, I was finally there – ready to dash out on the playground before anyone else could get there. It was a great moment... UNTIL... until the teacher, with a knowing look in her eye, said in a gentle, calm voice, “Mr. Hillmer, would you be so kind as to hold the door open for everyone else? And when they’ve all gone, please grab the garbage; it’s overflowing and needs your attention. We have a big art project today and we’ll need it to be empty.”

Now, perhaps that exact scenario didn’t happen to you, but can you relate to that concept? And before you pass that off as something only a child does... we know this desire to be first doesn’t go away when the gray hairs start to grow... getting the closest parking spot, being awarded that promotion instead of your coworker, when the light turns green and you hit the gas just a little harder than everyone else...

In the Gospel reading this morning, we see how Jesus’ disciples were loaded full of this “me-first” mentality. At this point in Mark 9, Jesus is doing more private teaching than public preaching. The words he shares with them are heavy, full of the very deepest truths of God’s wisdom – that He is going to die for their sins and rise again on the third day... All they could think about was being first in line for recess. Instead of marveling on the greatness of God’s love for them, they just wanted to know which of them was the greatest. You might say they were acting like children, when Jesus turns their world upside down.

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” ³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Jesus begins by stating the truth – the truth that his disciples missed: “Greatness comes by serving others, by willing to be the very last so that others may be cared for.” That’s what Jesus himself just talked about – he has come from heaven above to serve, to serve all – so that by his humble service, all mankind might have life eternal. They missed this message, and sadly, too consumed with self.

Like the disciples, we all struggle with serving OUR SELF FIRST, before others. Why? It makes us feel like we’re the greatest, though the real answer is the sin of pride. It’s the opposite of humility; but who wants to do that? Who would gladly put other’s needs ahead of their own? That’s *my* parking spot. *I’m* worth more to the company than you. *My* car’s faster than yours. That is not greatness. Greatness comes by serving others. Jesus says it, and then he demonstrates as he takes that child in his arms.

O to be a child... to be *that* child - the one whom Jesus stoops down and gently scoops up on his lap. O to be that child – the one who gets to nestle right into Jesus’ arms, safe, secure, no worries, no fears. O to be that child, welcomed by Jesus. There’s one half of our brain that is expressing that wish, isn’t there? And yet, the other half of our brain knows full well that if Jesus is going to stoop down and scoop me up on his lap, he’s going to put me over his knee, and dish out the discipline I deserve. In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear the punishment described in no uncertain terms: Jesus said: **“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 18:3)

This moment was probably pretty awkward for the disciples... far worse than having to hold the door and take out the trash. Jesus not only exposed their selfish hearts, but told them what the consequences were going to be. And yet, look again at how Jesus handles their sin of pride – he calmly, lovingly and firmly calls them to repent. Without any grand theatrics, Jesus does two amazing and important things at once – both for his disciples and for us: 1) He warns us plainly that pride is no joke; it's damnable sin. 2) He shows us that humble service out of love for God is really as good as it gets.

To express a spirit of friendliness, love and service towards another, is to express that to Jesus himself. That's what greatness is all about – and it starts with Jesus. While we certainly have deserved to be taken over God the Father's knee, Jesus stepped in and took it for us – with every lashing of the whips, with every pounding of the hammer to the nails, with all the scorn and shame of the cross – there Jesus served us. The result of his service to us is this: our sins of pride and selfishness, our ego-centered actions and words have been paid for in full. Through faith in Jesus' great act of service for us, we have been forgiven all our unrighteousness, we have been cleansed completely. By God's grace, we know that we will forever rest in the lap of our Lord, nestled in his welcoming arms.

O to be a child; O, to be *that* child – and you know what, dear friends – you are! You are *that* child, not by your own merits, but through faith in Jesus. You are that child of God, loved by God, cared for by God, embraced by God, safe in God's almighty arms. And because you and I are that child – having all that we need – we are truly free to live as that child. We are free to serve one another. We are free to care for and support one another. We are free to hold the door and take out the trash, to help with Live Nativity or clean up day, to help our neighbor who's going through a rough time... we're free to serve in whatever other opportunities there may be – because we are that child of God. It doesn't get any greater than that!