

Date: August 21, 2022

Sermon Title: *The Kingdom of Heaven Belongs to Such as These*

Scripture: Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15

Preacher: Peggy Peek

It is great to be with you this week. Earlier this summer Mark asked me to preach one of the Sundays, he was going to be on vacation in August with his family and I happily agreed. Many of you may know, it was supposed to be last Sunday but I started feel a little covidish (is that word?) on Wednesday, August 3 and by the second week of August, I had my days and my nights mixed up. My dog Camden was really happy because I was home all of the time and I could not concentrate well enough to compose a complete sentence, much less a sermon. Kevin graciously offered to swap Sundays with me and he did a great job last Sunday after having to hurry up and finish his sermon he was supposed to preach today a week early. So to both Mark for asking me to preach and to Kevin for carrying a heavy load for me, I am very grateful.

I say it often to friends and family who don't go to Redland, but I want all of you here to hear me say, I am so blessed to serve with the great men and women who make up the staff here at Redland Baptist Church. They are men and women of integrity who are gifted in some many diverse and wonderful ways. I am blessed and I hope you feel that blessing as well.

As we begin this morning's sermon, some of you may be wondering if we ever ask one another but who among us on staff is the greatest? That's a pretty audacious question, isn't it. It is not one of our agenda items for discussion at our weekly staff meeting but today, we are going to hear about a time when Jesus' disciples wanted to know the answer to that question. It's a very bold question and in the same way it doesn't really sit well if a group of co-workers discuss it now among one another, it did not go over well 2000 years ago either.

I have asked David/James to come and read our morning text in Mathew 18 & 19. As he comes forward, if you are able and in honor of God's word and the power it has to transform lives, would you please stand as you find the text beginning in Matthew 18.

Scripture Reading Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15

Matthew 18:1-5

***At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.***

Matthew 19:13-15

***Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.***

Thank you David/James

There is a dispute about greatness among the disciples. Matthew is a tax collector and he knows how to measure value—and greatness is the topic of discussion. And this topic leads the disciples to argue. Our world, even among the church and faithful Christians, is often at odds over who or what is best. This passage is as relevant to us this morning as it was to the disciples who wanted to hear Jesus' perspective.

Unfortunately, the disciples have a very defective understanding of servant leadership at this point. They have been with Jesus almost three years and are ready for a promotion based on merit not sacrifice. Their perspective does change once they experience Jesus' time on the cross and his resurrection but for now, they have a very selfish view of their status in the Jesus corporation.

Just a few verses earlier in Matthew 17:22-23, we read: <sup>22</sup>**When they came together in Galilee, he [Jesus] said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. <sup>23</sup>They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.**

Jesus had been speaking of his coming suffering, the disciples' grief proves short-lived, and they busy themselves with arguing about who is greatest in the kingdom. They soon began to think only about what position they would have in Jesus' kingdom.

Jealousy was rampant. Peter, their ring leader had walked on water, had been on the mountaintop with Jesus, and had even had his taxes paid by means of miracle. In verse 3 Jesus warns his disciples: <sup>3</sup>**"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** Children are held up as an example, not of perfection or faithfulness, but of humble concern about their importance; their selfless ambition to help others. Jesus advocates for "humility of position not childishness of thought".

Jesus answers the question asked in verse 1 with verse 4: <sup>4</sup>Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

As I was studying, several definitions of humility stood out: "Humility is that grace that, when you know you have it, you've lost it!" and "True humility is not thinking meanly of oneself; it simply not thinking of oneself at all." Warren Wiersbe

Paul helps us understand this concept in Philippians 2

**2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup>then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup>not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. <sup>5</sup>In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.**

**Someone who welcomes a child like this in verse 5 is not welcoming literal children but those who humble themselves to become like children. These are Jesus' true disciples. They are not welcomed because of their importance or merit but because they come in Jesus' name—they belong to him. The requirement to become like children to enter the kingdom in verse 3 confirms that those in verse 5 are simply Jesus' disciples—Christians. If you are a follower of Christ, that is your primary identity "Child of God".**

In my online bio on our website, that is how I introduce myself: Peggy is first and foremost a child of God. When we were asked to update those a couple of years ago, we were given a space recommendation. I edited down a previous document but it was still a little too long, I guess and someone edited out that first line. I had it put back in and said that any other part of my bio could be cut but not that—because in the end—that is who we are—not our profession, not our place in our earthly family, not our country of origin...it is our relationship with God that is the eternal description of who we are.

The disciples wanted to hear Jesus say who among them was the greatest. He ignored that request and taught them about true greatness using an example of a child. Humility that is authentic does

not deny the gifts that you have been given—but it does involve using them to edify the body of Christ not ourselves. That is why we have been focusing on identifying our spiritual gifts in August during our Merge time together. We all have at least one and probably a couple. But they are not meant to be used to bring us glory but to advance the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted his disciples to know this and act on it and Jesus wants us to know this and act on it.

He uses the characteristics of a child: trusting, dependence, the desire to make others happy, an absence of boasting or selfish desire to be greater than others to illustrate this principle. Because of our human condition, we all want to be famous—being a servant isn't glamorous by the world's standards. The disciples wanted to know who was greatest in the Kingdom. But Jesus warned them that, apart from humility, they could not even enter the kingdom!

Our text this morning continues into the next chapter in verses 13-15 where the disciples chastise those bringing the children to be blessed by Jesus. We don't know why they rebuked the people, but we can imagine—maybe they were worried that the schedule was being delayed—they were on their way to Jerusalem to inaugurate the new kingdom. Maybe they were in the middle of an important discussion, and this was going to take everything off course. While children were highly valued, they were not ordinarily present in adult settings...they were very much not seen and not heard generally and seen only in certain circumstances.

Jesus uses this opportunity for two teachable lessons—he loves the children and wants to be accessible to them AND he wants the disciples, then, and us, now, to know that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those like them—those with childlike faith.

I chose this passage for this morning because I felt led by the Holy Spirit to share about how our childlike faith helps us as Jesus is establishing the Kingdom of Heaven now as we walk here on earth in the middle of Montgomery County, Maryland. So I am going to spend a few minutes taking you back in time to some counties in Texas. Our first county is Kent County Texas where my Dad was born. He grew up in Clairemont where my grandfather was the county judge. When he was a teenager, during a summer revival, my Dad made his profession of faith in Christ and was baptized in a stock tank. His family moved to the Dallas Fort Worth area a few years later but his older sister, my Aunt Charlene had married and started her family and stayed in West Texas and lived in Jayton, also in Kent County. In the 1950's there were about 2000 people. Now there is only 800.

In 1966, on August 18, my parents got married by a justice of the peace, a week after my Dad defended his doctoral dissertation. They moved to San Antonio and my dad started teaching Math at Trinity University. In December of 1966, my Mom's doctor told my Dad that they were expecting at least 2 babies. And he and my mom welcomed my twin sister, Penny and me in May of 1967. 20 months later, my parents added my brother David to our family in February 1969. I am sure those early years were a blur to them. My dad bought their first TV to watch the moon landing that Summer. They were busy with life and did not attend any church.

On Easter of 1970, they packed up the family to go visit my Aunt Charlene and her family in Jayton. After my mom died, we found lots of keepsakes she had saved and here is the order of worship from that Easter Sunday in Jayton. When I was in college, my Aunt Charlene shared about that day. They lived across the street from church and my mom had gone back with my aunt and cousins for Sunday night church. When the pastor gave his invitation, my mom leaned over to my aunt and said, "I've never done that." My aunt said, "I'll go with you" and she went forward with my mom who prayed to receive Christ. In my immediate family, we didn't talk about spiritual things and my mom never told me that story and I knew it would not be a topic my mom would feel comfortable talking about so I never asked her. But I still remember my aunt as someone who prayed for me—who did

talk about spiritual things, who encouraged me in so many ways—and I know she did that with my Dad, her younger brother and my mom her sister in law.

A couple of weeks ago, my brother texted me this picture of him and my mom from the Summer of 1970. I hadn't remembered seeing it before. It was just a couple of months after my Mom prayed to receive Christ. I remember that beach vacation very well. I learned some very important things that week. We had all gone with my Mom's parents for a week or a long weekend at the beach. My pap-pa taught my sister and me, who had just turned 3 how to peel and eat boiled shrimp. It was awesome.

At the end of the evening, my pap-pa tucked my sister and me into bed and told us to say our prayers. We let him know that we didn't know how to do that. And I remember him sternly lecturing my mom that we were old enough to be saying our prayers at night and why had she not taught his granddaughters how to pray. As a 3 year old, I remember being fascinated that someone could scold my Mom but even more fascinated that I was old enough to pray. That week at the beach started a nightly routine in our family of bedtime prayers. That daily time disciplined all of us (my Mom and Dad included) as we began to bring our concerns to God and expect his regular care and comfort that we can experience with the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Two summers later, my parents found us a farmhouse in the country outside San Antonio and we moved to almost 14 acres in Schertz, Texas in Guadalupe County outside of San Antonio. At that time, public schools in Texas didn't offer Kindergarten, so my sister and I started Kindergarten at First Baptist Church in Schertz. Here is my Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Kinnear. I learned a lot from Mrs. Kinnear that year. She was the kindest, smartest teacher and we loved going to school at our church.

We also sometimes went to church and my Sunday School Kindergarten teacher was Miss Edie Moon. She gave the best hugs and we prayed for her Aunt, Lottie Moon who had been a missionary. She was one of Lottie Moon's nieces. It wasn't until I went away to college that I realized that Lottie Moon was not only Miss Edie's Aunt but who all Southern Baptists honor with our International missions offering. My love for missions began in Sunday School with the child like faith to pray for missionaries I had never met.

This week as I was working on this sermon, I found the church directory that many of these pictures come from. Tucked in the back was this letter from 1973 when I would have been in first grade. I remember one Sunday night, my mom coming home with wet hair. We had stayed home with my Dad. I asked my mom about her wet hair and she said she had gotten baptized. I still don't know why we all didn't go but she had gone by herself. This letter was mailed to her probably that Monday and she saved it. Listen to the words from our pastor Brother Bob: *"We are glad to have you as part of our fellowship. It is our prayer that your stay will be long, fruitful and happy; and that we will be a mutual blessing to each other. The entire church membership of First Baptist wants you to feel a part of this local church, and as such a part of the body of Christ."*

It took more than 3 years for my mom to move from a first time profession of faith to choosing to be baptized. It took disciples from several churches and different ministry programs until my Mom was ready. A little more than 2 years later, during vacation bible school, I prayed to receive Christ and the summer between my 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade years, I was baptized. One of my classmates was also baptized and before that service on a Sunday night, we met with the pastor. He explained to us that the baptism was only a symbol of what God had already done in our hearts. I still remember his words.

Church was where God was helping the Kingdom of God become real in a very practical way. Some of the other things my mom saved were workbooks from church. Here is my scripture memory workbook from 5<sup>th</sup> grade—I guess it was similar to Awana. Here are a couple of the memory verses I signed off on:

**“Choose you this day whom ye will serve.” Joshua 24:15 and “The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.” Joshua 24:24 and “The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation.” Exodus 15:2**

By the time I reached 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I was the only one in my family still occasionally attending church for a variety of reasons. And my church family at First Baptist was very faithful to point me to Christ and spiritual maturity. As I started middle school, my 6<sup>th</sup> grade Math teacher was Mrs. Hamblen. She and her husband were members at First Baptist. It was so important for my spiritual development to see a person of influence in my school space be a person of integrity and faith at school and church. Her consistency spoke louder than any words ever did.

I have just have one more story about First Baptist this morning. I managed to make it to high school. Schertz was a small town. Everybody knew everybody. One of our high school football and baseball coaches started attending First Baptist my sophomore year when I had him for World History. He heard through the high school grapevine that I was getting involved in some things I probably shouldn't be involved with. He pulled me out of class one day and in that hallway, he suggested that I consider what I was doing and whose I was. Coach Sinclair kept me from choosing a wrong path and I remember him saying he that he almost decided to not say anything except that I was his sister in Christ and he expected more of me.

So why all of these stories of people you have never met? When we welcome people in the name of Christ, we welcome Christ—we welcome the Kingdom of God. But none of us welcome others exactly the same way. We are all gifted in different ways—and for some of us, it is relationships at church, for some of us, it is relationships at work, for some of us it is relationships with family members. In my life, family members, church members and teachers drew me to Christ and helped me grow in Christ.

As we get ready to close this time together it may be that like my Mom that Easter Sunday morning you have never acknowledge Christ as your Lord and Savior—if that is the case, grab someone's hand and come forward and make that decision. Or it may be that you have made that decision but have not yet followed it with believer's Baptist. Again, you can come forward and we can help you be obedient to that call on your spiritual life. Or you may be being prompted to serve somewhere here at Redland or to speak truth to someone at work. The altar is open for you to come and pray about it and we can pray with you as well.

Let's pray