



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
22 September 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

“What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. The disciples got caught! It’s like passing notes in elementary school or whispering in the middle of a lecture in college. Maybe even like talking to your neighbor in the middle of a sermon. The disciples got caught. They were taking a road trip to Capernaum and while on the road they began to argue. And not just arguing over what they might have for lunch or when they could stop again or how many hours it would take to get to Capernaum. No they were arguing over who was the greatest. A nasty debate to get into when you are traveling with Jesus. If you have ever taken a road trip than you know exactly how it happened. The two kids in the back seat and the parents up front. All of a sudden minutes into the ride the two children are punching each other, yelling at each other and dad promises to pull the car over and take care of both of the kids at the same time if they don’t stop it.

My sister and I were notorious for such events we would spend that first hour of a road trip in comfort sleeping off the rest of the early morning and then stop for breakfast. It did not matter what was next—but if we got back in the car you could almost guarantee that we would duke it out at some point. Maybe it was because we rode in a minivan and each of us had our own seat but obviously one of us was always in front of the other. Whatever the reason, we would get back in the car after breakfast and in no time be yelling and poking and arguing about what pain one child was inflicting on another. And then dad would get mad. Reach his arm around behind the driver’s seat and try to catch the leg of the person sitting in the front of the two back seats. Which would then send the person in the front seat immediately over the back of the seat and next to the other person so that dad could not reach either of us. Of course the two of us, enemies seconds before were now allies against a common enemy. Whose name was dad.

Eventually we would have to pay the piper—we would stop for gas or stop for lunch or dare to ask, “are we there yet?” from the very back of the minivan of course, only to have mom turn around and tell us not ask again until the next time we stopped. The disciples were behaving much the same way as they walked behind Jesus to Capernaum. Elbowing each other, poking at each other—arguing over which one of them was the greatest, the best, the most faithful, the best leader of the disciples. Jesus had to be a little frustrated. Here are the twelve disciples he is entrusting the core message of his ministry to and they can’t stop arguing between themselves long enough to hear the truth of what Jesus is saying. So Jesus waits until they arrive in Capernaum and are in the house for the night. Feet have been washed, dinner has been served, beds are made up and they are running over the days events and finally Jesus asks the question. “What were you arguing about on the way?” he asked them and no one said a word. They had been caught! It is the kind of question you get when you have a string of caramel hanging from your chin and your mother walks up to you and says, “have you been eating chocolate, caramel ice cream before dinner?” Jesus already knows the answer but he is out to prove a point. Peter, James, and John were the probable favorites—the first three disciples Jesus called—who still got to go places with him when the others did not. Among them, Peter figured he had it all wrapped up because he was the first to call Jesus the Messiah, but the others reminded him that he was also the one whom Jesus called Satan, for refusing to accept what Jesus said about his own death. That was the heart of the problem, really. They were arguing about who was the greatest because they could not stand what Jesus had said about being killed. They did not understand and they were afraid to ask, so they got as far from it as they could by playing status games instead. Who is first, who is best, who is greatest. You know what that is like. When you are scared of something, don’t ask. Act like there is nothing wrong. Change the subject and talk about something else instead, something that makes you feel big and strong. That is what the disciples were doing, which was why Jesus had to sit them down and give them a leadership seminar right after dinner. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” he told them.



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And then as if Jesus already knows that the disciples will not really understand what he is saying--he decides to add an object lesson to the mix by taking a child in his arms and telling the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Now if it wasn't clear to the disciples before Jesus took the child in his arms—the point surely could not have been missed by the disciples after the child went back to its mother. We, you and I, are entrusted with the responsibility of raising God's children. I say that and many of you might immediately think of the children sitting close enough this morning for you to catch their eye, or the children in BLAST or perhaps your own children, your grandchildren, nieces and nephews. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Jesus had a thing about children. While other people tended to ignore anyone shorter than their own kneecaps, Jesus saw what was going on down there. He saw the toddlers hanging onto their mother's skirts and shrinking away from the stray dogs, the wagon wheels, and the big feet of people who didn't seem to notice them. He saw them trying to keep up with the grown-ups when they walked. He saw how the adults played and talked with the children when there was nothing else going on but quickly lost interest in them the moment another adult appeared.

Children were fillers, not main events. They were gifts of God who would be useful someday—to look after their parents, to hold down responsible jobs, to have children of their own—but meanwhile they were more tolerated at times than appreciated for who they were as children. Jesus seemed to like them just the way they were, which was unusual for a man, and especially for a bachelor. Although he had none of his own, Jesus was not afraid of babies. He took them in his arms and blessed them. He knew how to put his hand behind their wobbly heads, how to pass them back to their mothers without dropping them. Even the two year olds did not bother him. He never asked their parents to please take them to the nursery. On the contrary, when his disciples scolded people for bringing their children to church, Jesus was outraged. The kingdom belongs to such as these, he said. They are full-fledged citizens of God's kingdom—not tomorrow, or ten years from now but right now, today.

Do you wish to spend some time with God? Then get down on one knee with some of the three- and four-year-olds when they come out of BLAST and look them in the eyes. Get down on the ground and color with a child laughing at their jokes that don't make any sense and never mind that you have laundry to finish or more important things to do. Our children are not filler—they are the main event. Opening yourself up to one child is better for your soul than finishing a project or getting a raise or even reading a whole book of the Bible. There will be no payback. Our children are not in charge of anything, they cannot buy you anything, they cannot invite you over to dinner with some friends. They have no status, no influence, no income, which makes them great in the eyes of God. They are just what we need. And we are able to work on our own greatness by understanding that it is what you do when no one is looking, with someone who does not count, for no reward, that ushers you into the presence of God. In my office, is a plaque. It says simply, "Nothing you do for children is ever wasted." Jesus would agree. Today we are taught one more lesson in this upside down, inside out kingdom of God, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first and everyone who thinks he or she is on the top is in for a big surprise. Jesus is not just talking about children, either. He is talking about all the little ones in this world with no status, no influence, no income. Daring us to welcome them as bearers of God, to believe that God's hierarchy is the reverse of ours and that greatness is available to those with no ambition.

I went to Starbucks with a group of students this past week and listened as they spoke of the many activities they are dedicated to. I listened as they spoke not out of frustration or fatigue but out of a sense of adventure and thankfulness for all that God has provided for them. Through the eyes and actions of these we are taught about being thankful for all that we are able to do in this life. And through each and every experience, each and every child, you and I, are offered the chance to see the very face of God. In God's world, things are different.



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Toddlers determine the course of our lives. Children lead churches and all of us are taught to listen and learn from those who are younger than us and greater in the eyes of God than we ourselves. Second sons get to go first, while servants sit down at tables they used to polish and the greatest disciple is the one who waits on them. If you want to enter this kingdom, there is a way: go find someone, who cannot repay your kindness, to put your arms around and say hello to God. Amen.