



Roanoke, Virginia
April 22, 2018

“Little Ones”

Matthew 18:1-5, 10-14

Rev. Rachel C. Thompson

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” **2** He called a child, whom he put among them, **3** and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **4** Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **5** Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

10 “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. **12** What do you think? If a shepherd 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 tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. **14** So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The week following Easter Sunday I did the children’s sermon, and if you were there you may remember that during the children’s sermon I was holding a bouquet of flowers that I said represented the joy that Easter brings me. But I said that with news that good, with news as good as Easter, there’s only one thing you can do with it, you have to share it with your friends. And so I began to pass out the flowers to all the children gathered on the steps, and I boldly said that everyone could have a flower because there is always enough Easter joy to go around.

Now at this point in the story it’s important to know two things: First, I’m pretty smart, so I’d counted in my head and I knew that I had exactly enough flowers for every child sitting on the steps, and I’d have one left for myself, I had fourteen. Second, unbeknownst to me, there were at least two children in the sanctuary who were not sitting on the steps, but were in the pews close enough to the front to see that I was passing out flowers.

So after my bold proclamation, as soon as I started handing the flowers out, darting down the aisle came Extra Child Number One. And I thought to myself, fine, it's fine, I still have enough for each kid until darting down the aisle came Extra Child Number Two.

So much for there being enough Easter joy for everyone. Foster Lyons graciously went without a flower until after the service when I was able to acquire some more for her, but ever since then I've been thinking: those extra children, they came running because they knew I had something to offer them. They came running.

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

There's a basketball stadium down in Durham, North Carolina, that some would say is pretty close to equivalent to the kingdom of heaven. The Duke University Blue Devils play at the famed Cameron Indoor Stadium, and I've been a lifelong UNC fan, but even I will tell you there's really nothing like being at Cameron for a game. The atmosphere is electric, everyone is cheering and jumping up and down and at some point during every game over the speakers blares one of my all time favorite songs by DJ Khaled featuring T-Pain, Rick Ross, Ludacris and Snoop Dog called All I Do Is Win. If you don't know the song, the lyrics say over and over again All I do is win, win, win no matter what, all I do is win, win, win.

It's a great pump up song and I love it, but it reflects a certain tendency in our culture, perhaps even an obsession with winning. We want so desperately to be great.

You can blame it on capitalism or materialism or any ism you like, but this is not a new trend. Competition is woven into human nature, and has been for as long as human history has been recorded.

Two thousand year ago, Jesus is talking with his friends, and they've just finished a healthy discussion about taxes. And somehow, it gets into the disciples' heads that this would be a good time to discuss which one of them is most important. So they gather up their courage and they ask him, "Jesus, in the kingdom of heaven, who is the greatest?"

Jesus, of course, is utterly opposed to offering direct answers to any question, so instead of providing a ranking for the greatness of his disciples – John here, Peter here, Judas way down here – instead he calls a child, and he puts the child in their midst.

He says, "You want to know what it means to be great? This child – this is a good place to start."

He takes their question, and he turns their expectations upside down.

Everything you thought you knew about what it means to be great? Throw it out the window. You want to be a big deal? You want to matter, to people, to God? Then forget, my friends, about winning. Forget about success and fame and accolades – sit down, be humble, start there, and you'll begin to understand greatness.

To bring home the point, he offers a metaphor, the story of the lost sheep, and of the shepherd who leaves behind ninety-nine other sheep to find the one lost little one.

If you've spent much time in church, you've probably heard this story, or the version that's recorded in Luke, many times. I grew up hearing this story so often that it just made sense

to me. Of course, if a shepherd lost one sheep, the rational solution would be to leave ninety-nine perfectly good sheep behind to go searching for the one that went astray on the mountain.

But really – if an actual shepherd heard this story, he'd likely think Jesus was off his rocker. Who leaves ninety-nine perfectly good sheep behind unprotected to go searching after one lost little one? No shepherd in her right mind would do this. This is a terrible business decision.

The shepherd who is concerned with winning, with greatness, does not leave behind ninety-nine good sheep to go seeking after one. Having ninety-nine sheep is pretty good. If you're in school right now and you got a 99% on a test, you'd feel pretty good about yourself, wouldn't you? Really, what is the difference between ninety-nine and one hundred? Not much. It's little.

But in the kingdom of God, the little ones matter. And this is good news.

I spent some time this last week in Montreat, North Carolina at a conference for pastors, and I participated in a track particularly focusing on ministry with youth. We spent the whole time talking about teenagers – who teenagers are, what they need, and what ministry with youth and their families can look like, and most importantly we talked about why the church still matters for the young people of today. What does the church have to offer them?

We might not have needed to have this conversation in the same way fifty years ago when it was just assumed that church mattered, that the church has something unique and authoritative to offer society. But that's not the world we live in right now. In the world we live in right now, 1 in 3 eighteen to twenty-nine year olds is completely non-religious – it's not that they're vaguely affiliated but don't attend much – no, 1 in 3 claim no faith based affiliation at all.

You might think this sounds like a depressing conference. Here we are working so hard to help our youth know the love of God and develop an experience of faith that makes a difference in their lives, and still for a whole third of them, it's not working.

If we're being honest, when faced with statistics like these, many of us may start to wonder, Where has our God gone? Where is Jesus? What is he doing? We've been trying to follow him, we've been trying to be humble, but they tell me you can't argue with numbers and the numbers seem to say he is leaving us behind. Our kids are getting lost. We are getting lost.

But it is not the will of your Father in heaven that even one of these little ones should be lost.

See, it's the little lost things that the shepherd loves the most. And this is good news, because while the rest of us are gathered together waiting safely back at home, our shepherd is out on the mountain, keeping an eye out for the last, the lost, the least, the little. There are many, and he loves them all.

Imagine the rejoicing that is going to burst forth when even one of these little ones comes back home.

So if it appears that we are losing ground, that the church is losing her place of prominence, that a life of faith is losing its appeal to younger generations, if it appears that we are becoming small, becoming little – don't be afraid.

The best thing we can do is to show the world what we have to offer, and we do that by following in the example of our shepherd, who leaves everything behind to save one lost sheep, who finds greatness in humility, who even though he was equal to God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God.

So let me tell you church, we have something to offer, to our children, to all children, to teenagers, to adults, to any person who feels lost or alone, we have something to offer. It's not our programs, although our programs are strong. It's not the food we serve at church dinners, it's not the trips and retreats, and it's not the sparkle of a recently renovated building. These things are wonderful, but you can find them other places. No, the unique and authoritative witness of the church is the good news that the kingdom of God is not about winning. That we are set free from the cycle of competition and striving that the world works so hard to convince us is the only way to live. Because the kingdom of God is not about glory or glamour, it's not about riches and success, the kingdom of God is about the little ones, the humble, and the weak. The kingdom of God is a place where expectations are overturned and hierarchies upended. Where death is swallowed up in victory, where God's power is made perfect in our weaknesses, where the last become first, the lost become found, the least of these become the very center, and the little ones exemplify what it means to be great. The last, the lost, the least, the little – church we have so much to offer to anyone who feels any of these things.

It's like we're sitting here in this sanctuary with flowers, flowers of welcome, of justice, of meaning, of truth, of hope for every little one who is lost.

So don't despise them, don't throw your hands up in despair, and don't let statistics steal your vision or your joy. Welcome every single child of God you meet. Join our shepherd out on the mountain. Believe that the good news of the gospel will sustain us. Take your cue from the little ones among us, be humble, be joyful, be hopeful, and when you see something good: come running.

Jesus said, "Let all the little children come to me." May it be so.

Amen.