

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 6, 2026

Text: Matthew 18:1-20

*“Children not Champions”*

*“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* This question, asked of Jesus by His disciples, earned them quite a lecture. It exposed their desire for position and power in Jesus’ coming reign. It revealed their adversarial stance towards each other. It showed that they completely misunderstood the nature of the heavenly kingdom that Jesus proclaimed in word and deed. *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* This question meant that Jesus still had a lot to teach His disciples.

So, teach, He did. He began with an action, reaching out to lead a nearby child to stand in their midst. Then He warned them: *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Oh dear. They had asked Jesus for what they considered some advanced teaching in God’s ways, but He led them right back to the basics. *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matthew 4:17). *“You must be born again”* (John 3:5). *“Whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

No doubt this mystified Jesus’ disciples. They wondered about spiritual greatness, and Jesus showed them a child. Children are small, weak, inexperienced, and needy. They depend upon the care of others for their survival. How could that be great in God’s sight? But Jesus was just getting started.

He went on to give them a promise followed by a stark warning. *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me...”* What did this mean? *“[B]ut 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.”* What worse punishment could await those whose selfish, arrogant attitudes led child-like believers to follow them into sin and ruin? How about the eternal, hell of fire? With more shocking, violent language, Jesus urged His disciples to fight temptation and sin because their eternal souls truly did depend on it: *“if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away...if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.”*

*“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. For the Son of Man came to save the lost.”* Humble yourselves and become like a little child. Beware lest you lead a little one who believes in Jesus into sin. Receive a child in my name, and you receive me. This kingdom of heaven, of which Jesus spoke, had nothing in common with the one envisioned by His glory-seeking disciples when they asked Him who was the greatest one in it.

They tried to grasp God’s reign in terms similar to the kingdoms of this world. They expected Jesus to tell them the secret of spiritual success. They wanted to know how to climb the ladder to heavenly glory. They

longed for a path for them to become the greatest before God. Oblivious they were to the fact that this consigned them to a ruinous life of competition with each other, conflict with God, and eternal condemnation.

So, Jesus called them to repent of their false kingdom notions. “Stop striving to control your own destiny or author your own success. Consider this little child here. How can one so small, so weak, so unknowing and needy ever be so happy? Is it not because his parents love and care for him? They feed him and clothe him. They hold him when he is afraid. He trusts them. So, you, humble yourselves and listen to what I say: Though you are little, your angels always see the face of my Father in heaven. Though you are lost in blind arrogance, I, the Son of Man, have come to seek and save you. Instead of fighting with each other in vain pursuit of some idol of dominance, receive one another, with faith in my name, as beloved children, as your own dear brothers and sisters. After all, I am the Son of the living God. I humbled Myself to become a human child born of Mary to seek and to save you. Depend on Me, as a child rests peacefully in the arms of her mother, and live with each other in love and kindness under My loving reign.”

The kingdom of heaven is the reign of God’s steadfast love demonstrated in Jesus Christ. The Son humbled Himself to become a man who trusted His Heavenly Father and lived to accomplish His saving will. He humbled Himself to carry the sins of all people as His own burden that He might suffer the eternal, hell of fire for us, to spare us all. He bestows

the power of His death and resurrection upon us in the Sacrament of Baptism. Through it, the Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus to die to unbelief, arrogance and every other sin that besets us, and to rise anew to live as trusting, beloved, and friendly children of God. He binds us together in Christ to make of us one holy family.

Instead of quarrelling, debating, and struggling to best each other as the greatest in God's kingdom, Christ teaches us to look out for each other as a shepherd, who searches for his lost sheep. So greatly loved by God our Father, and by Jesus, our Lord and Brother, the Spirit enlists us in a new life of assisting each other to live in faith. We must no longer despise each other, dream of our triumphs, boast of our victories, or search out another's failings to count ourselves the superior. We have been given God's commands to guide us in repentance, so that we can humbly go to those in danger of losing their faith through sin, warn them of their danger, and by God's grace lead them away from sin's deadly snares. We have God's precious promise of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ to trust for our salvation and to proclaim to each other when we repent of our sins. And we have our Lord's promise that He will help us to fulfil this royal calling of mutual love and care, for it is His good work among us. *"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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."*

The ways of heaven's reign are higher than ours, but God makes them known to us through teaching of His Son, and by His Spirit, He calls and empowers us to walk in their ways. Thanks be to Jesus, our Lord, who calls us from striving in vain to be a champion that we may live in faith as God's children, loved and loving each other in His name. Amen.