

In the Third Century, Lawrence, a deacon in the church in Rome, was ordered to turn over the church's treasures to the ruler of the city. What Lawrence did was this – he brought out of the church, and presented to the ruler, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the suffering, the needy. "These," he said, "are the true treasures of the church." In a rage, the ruler had Lawrence executed, roasted alive on a gridiron.

St. Lawrence understood Jesus' words in our text. "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" ask His disciples. Jesus, calling a child to Himself, speaks these words: "*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*"

The greatest treasures of the Church are not her gold and silver vessels, her elaborate architecture, and beautiful windows. The greatest treasures of the Church are little children, and those like them who are weak, dependent, insignificant, needy, even helpless.

The disciples don't get it. Just days later they try to prevent parents from bringing their children to Jesus. They, with all the Jews, understood children to be, not great, but insignificant. The Gentiles were even worse. They could do whatever they wanted to their children. Abort them, sacrifice them to their gods, leave them someplace where they would die of exposure.

The sinful world has not changed. What the world treasures is not weakness, but power. The insignificant are ignored. The movers and shakers are applauded as being great. The vulnerable, the helpless, including those in the womb, are not given the same value as those who are productive and affluent.

Now Jesus' disciples are not of the world. Yet here in our text they show themselves to be of the same mind with those who are of the world, for they seek greatness. They are not content with insignificance. They crave honor, the applause of others, yes even from God, for they ask Jesus not about greatness and honor in the world, but in God's kingdom.

If we search our own hearts, we will see this craving for greatness within ourselves. When we do something that is notable, we want to be noticed. When we give of ourselves, we want others to appreciate our great sacrifice. I know for a fact that this craving dwells in my heart. Does it not also dwell in yours?

Now Jesus' disciples, baptized and followers of Him, certainly were part of the kingdom of heaven. Yet Jesus gives them a stern warning: "*Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

The word *turn* here means to repent. This is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. Repentance must be daily for the disciple of Jesus. Daily our sinful pride is at work in us. Daily we must repent. "*Turn (repent) and become like children,*" says Jesus.

He is not telling us to act like children, but to become like children. Become one who is weak, who is needy, even helpless.

It is simply not true that God helps those who help themselves. Not with regard to salvation. Just the opposite, God helps those who cannot help themselves. Those who can help themselves do not need God. Sadly, I hear this from people far too often: "I'm doing fine by myself. I'm not a bad person. I'm not concerned about where I'm going to go when I die." What infant would tell his parents that he doesn't need them, that he's doing fine without them? And that's just it. Those who are great in their own eyes, good enough apart from God, refuse the call from Jesus to become like children. But no one can enter the kingdom of heaven unless they turn away from themselves, and their greatness, to the Lord; unless they come to Him as needy, helpless children.

You, my friend, need to be absolutely helpless – a needy, beggarly child before God, because, for one thing, this is who you are. And also because God promises to give you all that you need. You see, Jesus did everything for you. He became the greatest of all by becoming the weakest, most helpless of all on the cross. He was despised as one who is insignificant. He was left there to die like one who is unwanted. The greatest thing you can do, since Jesus already did it all for you, is to open your hand as a poor, beggarly child, and receive what He freely gives you.

Now I confess that I stumble over this all the time. My sinful pride tries to close my hand to what God desires to give me. I do not like to admit that I am weak and helpless. In my own eyes, I am too great to be so humble.

But there is forgiveness in Jesus for sinners like me. And there is forgiveness also for you. Do not be too great in your own eyes so that you refuse to believe you need this forgiveness. Be weak, be helpless, become a child, and believe that God does forgive you, for truly He does.

The devil rages when you humbly, like a child, believe this in simple faith, just as the ruler of Rome was enraged at St. Lawrence. And the devil will do all he can to drive that simple, child-like faith from you.

But remember always who you are. You are God's child, baptized into Christ Jesus. Whether you are very young or very old, full of health or filled with illness, in the prime of your life or in your declining years, you are a true treasure of Jesus' Church. He sees you as great, not because of what you do for Him, but because of what He does for you. Your sins? He forgives all of them. And with your sins forgiven, the kingdom of heaven is yours in Jesus Christ your Savior. Amen.