

## Matthew 18:1-4

“Children grow up too fast.” Many parents and grandparents would agree with these words. One place where these words are especially true is within the church. “Unless you become like children,” says Jesus, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” But we are taught by society to act our age. Boys are supposed to shun their childish ways and act like men. And girls mature even faster than boys. Men are scolded by their wives when they behave like children. How are we supposed to become like children when everyone around us is pressuring us to become just the opposite?

Jesus’ disciples had no desire to be like children. In our text they come to Him asking, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” We know what they were thinking--the same thing that enters into our minds on a regular basis. “I’ve worked hard in the church. I’ve sacrificed. I’ve given up evenings at home to be at meetings. I’ve volunteered more times than I can remember. Unlike some, I’ve done much more than my fair share around here!” Thinking such things, Jesus’ disciples were all of the opinion, ‘Surely I am the greatest in the kingdom of heaven!’ And every time we point to something that we’ve done in the church; every time we point out what someone else is not doing, we are expressing the same thing. The lesson Jesus would have us learn is the same one He taught His disciples. Standing a child within their midst, He said: You are not even in the kingdom of heaven unless you become like children.

Children are not innocent. They are not without sin. Children, even when they are newborns, need the forgiveness of God in Holy Baptism. To become like children does not mean, therefore, that we must become pure and innocent. What Jesus means is that we must become helpless. We must become beggars--begging, crying for His gifts, ‘like newborn babies longing for the pure milk of His Word.’ This is the exact opposite of striving to be great. If your hands are reaching for greatness within the church, then they are not reaching for Jesus. God places His gifts only into empty hands. How touching it is when you put your finger into the little open hand of a small child. That little hand quickly clenches your finger. Such hands God wants us to have, like the hands of a child grasping His good gifts.

But within the church children grow up too quickly. We become independent as we get older. We think we have outgrown the need to be fed the simple stories of the Bible. We see ourselves as being helpless no longer. “Church is for kids,” some of us think, “and I’m not a kid anymore. I can take care of myself. I do not need God’s help as much as when I was a child.” We think we have become too big, too great, too important to act like a helpless child within the church. We’re beyond that now. We serve on committees. We fix things when they break. We earn money and support the church. Our hands, so busy now with working, and giving, and serving, have forgotten how to open up like a little child’s hand and grasp the gifts God places there.

On the Day of Judgment God will not use greatness in the church as the measuring stick to determine who will enter into heaven. Jesus tells us that many will say to Him on that day what great things they did for Him in His church, but He will say, “I never knew you. Depart from Me!” On that day only His children will He welcome. If you and I, therefore, do not act like God’s children today, how will we be God’s children on that day? If I am not a child, then I am not God’s child. If I am not helpless, in need of God’s good gifts, begging like a crying baby for them with my hands open to receive them, then I am not in His kingdom of heaven, nor will I ever be.

This may sound a little strange, but you and I need to start acting like children. Babies are selfish. They are focused on themselves. When they’re hungry, they cry to be fed. When they have a dirty

diaper, they cry some more. They are very needy and they don't mind letting you know it. This is exactly how we must be within the church. Craving the Word of God; eating it up like a hungry child nursing for all he's worth. God wants us to cry out to Him like babies with dirty diapers begging Him, as we confess our filthy sins, to forgive us and make us clean. God wants us to demand His Holy Supper. Like a baby who will not stop screaming until he gets what he demands, God wants us to beg for the eternal blessings--for the body and blood of our Lord given at His altar.

What mother will not feed her hungry baby crying out to her? What mother will let her baby sit in a filthy, stinking diaper? And so God, my friends, gives you exactly what you need. He does not turn away from your cries. When your child-like hands are open to receive, He fills them with His good gifts. Have you been crying out to God to help you with a problem in your life? Like a loving mother, He hears your cries. He sees your troubles. And He knows just how to help, and He does, and He will. He cannot turn away from His needy child.

Are you here today, not with a stained diaper, but worse, with a stained heart? Are you here with a burden of sin? Have your hands been reaching for greatness more than they have been reaching for Jesus? Do you acknowledge your sinfulness and beg for God's mercy? Then as needy children, you have come to the right place. No tiny baby can change his dirty diaper and make himself clean. But as a loving mother, God removes all the uncleanness from you. He forgives your sins. He cleanses your filthy stains. This He does for all of you because Jesus went to the cross for each one of you. He was covered with your filthiness. All your dirty sins were placed upon Him. How ugly He looked hanging from that cross, and yet we see Him there as our beautiful Savior, for because of Him, God now sees you as His beautiful children--covered in Jesus' innocence, clean and spotless in His eyes.

Now I do not want you to leave today thinking that it is wrong to work and serve within the church. On the contrary, we cannot help but offer ourselves and all that we have to God, because he became the sin offering for us. Your greatness in the church, however, has nothing to do with what you do, because any good thing you do is not even you doing it; it's God doing it through you. Your greatness has everything to do with being weak and helpless begging children. Greatness consists not in what our hands give to God, but in what great things He places into your hands. The more we become like children, the greater in God's kingdom we become because the more, then, He is placing into our open hands the greatest gifts which can ever be given, and which are given to you in Christ Jesus right here and now--forgiveness, life, and salvation--the kingdom of heaven! Amen.