Like a Child
Matthew 18:1-20

Earlier this summer, the WNBA caused controversy by releasing a list of the 30 best players in the 30 years of the league. It included a lot of good players, such as Sheryl Swoopes, Candace Parker, and Sue Bird, but it was talked about more for who was left out than for who was on it. As usual with the WNBA, they seem to forget Caitlyn Clark is a big reason for the increased interest in the league. Other current players haven't had a chance to achieve as much as some of the older players.

Arguing about who is the greatest can be a fun discussion. Debates over whether Michael Jordan or Lebron James is the greatest provides endless fodder for sports shows and sports columnists. As a Cubs fan, I'm hoping that Pete Crow-Armstrong beats Ohtani in the National League MVP race this year, even though the fact that Ohtani can pitch and hit usually puts him in a league of his own in discussions over who is the greatest. Outside of sports, others rank presidents, scientists, musicians, and more to try to rank the greatest.

Today's Gospel lesson begins with the disciples asking Jesus a question: "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). This kind of question is very important for people trying to get ahead in the world…or, if they're of a religious inclination, to impress God. We human beings complain about rules, but we really like rules, mostly because we think if we can stay on top of the rules of the universe–or at least appear to be on top of them, we'll be on top.

I don't know what the disciples were expecting when they asked that question. Perhaps they wanted to hear stories about leaders like Abraham, Moses, Deborah, and Elijah. Perhaps they wanted to hear stories about servants such as angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. Perhaps they were hoping that Jesus would tell them that they were the greatest, because of all they'd given up to follow Jesus.

Jesus' answer is unexpected. Jesus doesn't answer the question, or at least not right away. When Jesus is asked who is most important in His kingdom, Matthew says: "He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'" (Matthew 18:2-4)

Jesus beckons a child to come over, puts the child in the midst of the disciples, and holds that child up as the example they should follow. Indeed, Jesus tells His followers that unless they become like this child, they won't even enter into the kingdom of heaven, much less attain any sort of greatness in it.

And then Jesus says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."
What Jesus considers great is not what we consider great. In God's kingdom, greatness is not measured by capacity, skill, or performance. Greatness is measured by humble reception, even by dependence.

We mustn't miss Jesus' point here. Jesus is not saying that children are innocent and therefore, we should imitate them. Children may be gullible or credulous or unjaded; but, as any parent knows, children are not innocent. Like King David, writing in Psalm 51, Jesus knows

and we know that every child conceived by human parents is born in sin. That means we're all born wanting to be in charge. Part of the job of those God puts in authority over children–parents, grandparents, teachers, governments–is to keep them and the rest of us from running roughshod over others who are just as loved by God as we are.

What Jesus is pointing to in this child He sets before the disciples is the status of children. No one is needier than a child. All children need someone to take care of them. Think of what Jesus is saying to the question posed by the disciples then. He tells them, essentially, "You won't even enter My kingdom unless you recognize that there is nothing you can do to make yourself acceptable for life with God!" When it comes to life with God, the number one requirement is our neediness, our complete inability to be good enough or righteous enough for life with God!

We live in a world that elevates the experience of children. Even though it's been over a century since his first appearance, Peter Pan is still admired as the boy who won't grow up, and in fact gives his name to those suffering from "Peter Pan syndrome," those who can't seem to grow up. Even though the stand-alone stores are closed, some people still want to just be a Toys R Us kid. Whole industries, from toy makers to TV shows and more, are focused on children.

That's not how it was in Jesus' day. We think of being a child as a good thing. We think they're cute and cuddly. As work gets stressful and college classes get hard, we may long for the days when we had all of our needs taken care of, when we got to spend time coloring, when we had nap time built into our daily schedules. But that's not how it was in Jesus' day. Children were seen as foolish, lowly, powerless, helpless, and insignificant. In the first century, there's no other example of children being held up as a positive example.

That's what Jesus means by being like a child. The disciples are arguing about which one of them is the greatest, which of them is the most important, which of them is the most independent. Jesus instead tells them to be unimportant and dependent. A child is dependent on her parents to be fed and changed, cleaned and cared for, and can do nothing to help herself. The disciples needed to realize that they were totally dependent on God, on Jesus.

Like children, we cannot do anything for our own. All that we have has been given to us by God the Father, our creator. We can do nothing to get ourselves out of the dirt and mess of sin that we're trapped in. Left to our own devices, we'd never get free. We are totally helpless.

That's why Jesus came, and that's what the disciples didn't understand. Even in the midst of their misunderstanding, though, Jesus continues on. He's heading out of Galilee, where he's been doing all of his teaching, and heading towards Jerusalem. He's heading towards Jerusalem, towards the cross. He's heading towards Jerusalem to be delivered into the hands of men, and killed. He's headed towards Jerusalem to die on the cross for the sins of the slow-to-understand disciples that are with him. And He's headed towards Jerusalem to die on the cross for the sins of the slow-to-understand disciples that are here today.

We still follow in the ways of those disciples, as much as we don't want to admit it. We're more likely to not understand what we are called to do, and instead focus on what we know how the world works. Like Judas, we turn aside to follow greed and ambition. Like Peter,

we turn away when the going gets tough. Like the other disciples, we head towards lives that lead us to a place of safety and security, but at a cost of not following Jesus.

That's why we're called to turn and be like a child. We need to give up any thought of doing things on our own, and instead approaching God as a child approaches a dear father. It means recognizing our inability to change our condition on our own, and just trusting in God. It means giving up arguing over who is the greatest, and instead recognizing our own insignificance.

Being like children in our faith means recognizing that. We don't believe on our own. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in us through hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit doesn't just work through pastors and Sunday School teachers, though. Faith is sustained through family and friends, as children watch their parents and learn from their faith example.

Jesus also points us to children as an example in learning. As Martin Luther said in his preface to the Large Catechism, "I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly."

Jesus finally points us to children as those who see God's kingdom the clearest. They are the ones who see the wonders present around us in God's creation. They are the ones who come to Jesus just as they are. The ones who realize that they are God's children, loved by God, because that's what God does. And that's what God calls us to realize, as well.

We may always argue over who is the greatest. New sports stars rise up; older ones are forgotten. But we shouldn't look for those who are the greatest. Everyone does that. Instead, we should look out for those who are the least. Those who are forgotten, overlooked. Jesus points us to children as those who see God's kingdom the clearest. They are the ones who come to Jesus just as they are, in humility and dependence and trust. That's a faith worth imitating.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, IA
September 6, 2026