

The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost • September 4, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 18:1-20

“Repentance”

If you're perfect, this message isn't for you. You can leave now. (I know that I'll be staying around!)

“Do not hit your little brother!” This phrase – or the similar “Do not hit your little sister!” – has probably been uttered in almost every language known to man by every parent of multiple children. Little children get into trouble. Sometimes they don't mean to “be bad;” it just happens. And other times, they know exactly what they're doing. Even though they know that mom or dad has told them not to touch the top of a hot stove, the little fingers find their way up and get burned. Or they invade that cookie jar in the kitchen before dinner, eating half a dozen large chocolate-chunkers then suffering the upset stomach that follows. Part of a parent's role is to address their child's behavior, intentional or no. They do it for the good of their son or daughter, to teach them right from wrong, to keep them from doing harm to themselves or to others. Little children are dependent on their parents and the people who take care of them – and that's where Jesus directs his disciples' attention today.

In our Gospel text, Jesus answers his followers' question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven by setting a little child before them. No one would have been looking up to a child as an example of greatness. The great are independent and powerful, right? One like a child isn't the smartest or strongest or most innocent or most self-sufficient; rather, such a one is dependent. There's a lot going on in Jesus' teaching today, but it all revolves around how his followers are to care for the greatest among them – and the greatest in the reigning of heaven, those most precious to God, are those who most need what He provides.

Repentance isn't a popular thing in our times. I doubt that it ever really has been popular, though. Repentance is a hard concept for us to understand, especially if it's been a long time since we've been little children. It's not just about being sorry, though that's a part of it. Mom catches you hitting your little brother or sister, and you apologize – though you might not regret your action all that much. Eat all those chocolate chunkers out of the cookie jar before dinner, though, and you *will* feel regret as your stomach calls you out on your bad decision-making – and you will turn from going back to that cookie jar before dinner in the future. A significant part of repentance is turning away from making that wrong choice in the future, leaving it behind. If a little child persists in hitting their sibling or touching the hot stovetop or raiding the cookie jar, continuing to make the wrong choice, they end up doing more harm to themselves.

In laying out what it means to care for the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus shows us how important repentance is: giving up to temptation, deciding to go the wrong way, is fatal. God has given us the Ten Commandments as an overview of the order that He incorporated into Creation, and they are the measuring stick for all our choices. When you don't live up to the clear standard of holiness that the Commandments reflect, you're turning away from God. When you persist in turning away from God, you poison yourself – and even the poison which tastes sweet is still deadly. Jesus uses hyperbole in his illustration of the lengths to which one must go to avoid temptation, yet his message is clear; turn away from the poison that would kill you! God doesn't want His little ones to perish, so He calls Christians to care for one another especially when our need is the greatest. And we can do that by calling each other to repentance. That calling to repentance may come through as you listen to a sermon or engage in the study of God's Word. But it can and should also come through our brothers and sisters in Christ.

God is always seeking to call His little children back to Himself. As Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, we hear of the shepherd's love for his flock, even the dense one that wanders off. You and I have been that dense sheep. But Jesus is also telling us that we are to be like that shepherd who goes out to the wandering sheep, calling our brother or sister in the faith to repentance. That isn't an easy thing, especially in the super-individualized society in which we find ourselves. But it is a necessary thing. Today, Jesus is calling you to seek the good of your fellow disciples.

Repentance is about **restoration**. When a Christian goes to another who is trapped in sin, in following the things that lead away from God, it's very much an urgent-care situation. When you think about calling someone else to repentance by calling them out on the reality of sin in their life, you might wonder, "Who am I to tell my fellow Christian that they are in danger of wandering off from God?" Calling someone to repentance must always be done in compassion for the fellow believer, never speaking out of anger or arrogance or mean-spiritedness. You're not there to represent yourself. **You are an ambassador of Christ, and his goal is to rescue the wandering sheep.**

When is it appropriate to go to someone and encourage them to turn from sin, to call them to repentance? It's surprisingly simple: you need to do it if your brother or sister in the faith is in danger of no longer *being* your brother or sister. Being the most in need of what God offers, they are in that moment the greatest in that reigning of heaven. They need their fellow believers to come to them and point them back to the Good Shepherd. He is the one who is calling them back. He is the one who authored the Commandments for their well-being. He is the one who handed over his life to make them members of his flock, so that they would not perish. He is the one who makes restoration possible.

Here in Matthew 18 Jesus gives you, his ambassador, instructions on how to deliver his call in compassion. If your brother or sister in the faith is straying in sin, go to them directly and privately to point out the poison in their life. If they listen and repent, excellent! The wandering sheep has been restored to the flock. You need do nothing else. If, however, they do not listen but reject the call to repentance, return to them with two or three other believers – the smallest possible group – and again call them to repentance in love. Should that fail, bring the charge before the congregation so that your fellow believer may be even more clearly shown how they are walking away from their loving Lord. If they choose to persist in their sin even then, they are setting themselves outside of the fellowship of the Church. Continue to pray for them to be restored, however, because God can still call them back to Himself! And always remember God is calling you daily to live in repentance, turning from sin, depending on Him.

You aren't perfect. But you are God's little one. He has given us the gift of repentance – both shared and received – that you may stay and be with Him forever.

Amen.