

The Divine Life of God's Little Baptized Children
Matthew 18:1-20
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus says "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The last few weeks, we've heard that Jesus promised to build his church on the confession of His name and give it life continually in the ongoing application of the forgiveness of sins.

Today's text amplifies that promise and calls us to meditate on this repentance and forgiveness that defines life in and for the Church. Notice, right away, it's life *in* and for the Church. So many people think repentance and forgiveness is for those outside the Church, but to quote the 20th-century theologian Hermann Sasse,

"The great danger of the church of all ages is that she preaches repentance to the world and at the same time becomes a castaway because she forgets that all true repentance must begin at the house of God, with the repentance of the church."

Sasse is right; for, Jesus begins by teaching the disciples that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (aka, the Church) is the one who humbles himself like the little child in their midst. That's baptism, isn't it? We ought read this in the same baptismal light as when Jesus taught Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again – born from above – he

will *never* see the kingdom of heaven.” In fact, that same emphatic “never” is proclaimed again here: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will *never* enter the kingdom of heaven.”

We can’t overstate that. It’s no empty threat. In all those occasions in which we think we are above repentance, may erase our own sin, earn our own salvation – in all those matters of *pride* – we prove Jesus’ words over and over again. But, to be a baptized child of God is to recognize the childlike pettiness of our Old Adam and the childlike vulnerability, need, and joy of our New Adam. Yes, the simple joy of being at the feet of Jesus...that’s the faith of children. To be in bliss – unworried by the world’s problems, undeterred by fears of reputation, unashamed of being a beggar at the feet of Jesus – that’s the childlike faith of baptism.

If that’s what makes the *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven, then whoever receives even the immature brother in Christ hosts Christ himself, for that simple faith of our fellow Christian is honored and blessed to be a Christ-bearer. Conversely – and here’s where Jesus begins to show the reality of sin even in the Church and the need for a life of the continuous practice of repentance and forgiveness in the Church – conversely, where one causes a fellow brother in the faith to stumble from faith into falsehood... whoever causes such things will have the full wrath of God bear down on him.

Understand this rightly: On the one hand, to cause one to sin is not to offend someone by faith's *proper* confession. If faith confessing "Jesus is Lord" causes someone else to sin, that's their problem. If confessing "infant baptism" or "Christ bodily present in the Sacrament" causes someone to sin, that's their problem.

On the other hand, we must understand how easily we *do* cause others to sin when we do not see them as (or show them patience as) fellow baptized children, but only "deal with them" as obstacles or hurdles to 'my convenience.' "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger," the Scriptures say, yet how often do we fathers – because we want peace and quiet – discipline too harshly and (by our actions) teach our children not to respect God's own Fatherhood, but rather to fear or loathe God the Father and the designs He has played out for their salvation. How does that agree with how that verse concludes?: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, *but raise them up in the fear and instruction of the Lord.*" In the same way, children cause parents to sin when their continual disobedience makes parents bitter toward the promises of God. Husbands and wives would "cause one of these little ones to sin" if their spouse gave up on the Christian faith because they did not see their own spouse living it. If a pastor offended consciences because he was too impatient to teach, and even those who were eager to study with him and learn were offended and left the faith, would he not be equally guilty of "causing a little one" – the dear

baptized – to fall away? In short, to cause someone to sin is to cause them to reject the confidence and practice of faith in Christ Jesus that is rightly and joyfully theirs.

Thus, the image of the millstone around our neck should teach us how serious is any and every sin. So weighty is our sin that we could die a thousand deaths and still not atone for it. How careless we are with our fellow Christian's faith, rationalizing "He should know better," so that we justify our laziness in not displaying the faith for him.

And, where that woe is true for those who heap temptations upon others, it's also true as we heap temptations upon ourselves. As Paul says in Romans 7, our minds follow Jesus, our members idolize self-gratification. And, even within ourselves, our hands, eyes, feet, *all* our members can be tools of sin and temptation.

Too often we try to explain away Jesus' words here – "Cut off the offending member" – rationalizing, "If this was meant to be taken literally, then we'd see a bunch of amputees and blinded individuals laboring through life." But, we ought not explain it away. For to cause to sin is to cause to fall from the faith. If your own body is going to cause you to fall from the faith, is it not better to remove the member than to fall from the faith? This is why we do not see amputees... because those who follow Jesus' word have resisted temptation toward faith's murder and thus saved their own

members; and those who *have* fallen from the faith now idolize as god those same body members that caused them to fall.

Retain seriously this imagery as Jesus now progresses in thought to another type of member: The *members* of the mystical body of Christ –fellow believers – are to be safeguarded, cherished, never despised... for, consider how much that fellow Christian is loved by the Father, Jesus says.

And, He reminds us of the parable of the lost sheep, and he says that the Son of Man was sent by the Father to save the lost sheep (starting with “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”) But, notice how the term “lost” is to be interpreted here. It doesn’t refer to those who have never heard the gospel, but to those who have *fallen* from it... those ‘little ones,’ those baptized ‘whose angels see the face of the Father’, those who have given up on that status ... are the lost. While the Scripture has plenty of other passages in which Jesus calls His Church to share the gospel with all nations, the “all nations” is not the “lost” of this passage. Rather, those who have fallen from the faith are. Those who once had the treasures of the kingdom and have now wandered from them and absented themselves from the gifts of God found at altar and pulpit. Yes, when *that* one is brought back, is there not great rejoicing in all the congregation, indeed in all of heaven.

Here again we show our own sinfulness. For, we reason, “If there’s more joy over one who is *found* than over the 99 who never

went astray, perhaps / should go astray, enjoy the sins of the flesh and ‘my best life now,’ then be received back with great joy!” If this is your thinking, are you not already the one who is lost? Do we have such pride that we can only think how to faithlessly manufacture the situation to benefit ourselves? Do we not instead rejoice in the forgiveness of sins for our fellow brother, even if he had fallen away, even if he had sinned against me, nevertheless that which was lost has been found; that which had been feared dead is alive again. Such is the joy in the congregation that is truly built on the power of the forgiveness of sins. In Christian love, it can truly hope all things believe all things, endure all things... for it’s certain hope is that the death of Christ is so powerful, absolution is so effective, that all Christians can rejoice and live in harmony together as they all – as little baptized children – humbly dwell in the life of repentance and in the ongoing “deep clean” of the forgiveness of sins.

So then, if all Christians rejoice in this life together and in the beauty of the life lived at the foot of the cross, exhaling repentance, inhaling forgiveness... then we all desire that not a single little one would perish. But, if we desire that, ought we not take sin so seriously and understand it to be so dangerous to our fellow Christian’s soul, that we actually *address* sin, act upon it, treat it, remove it from our midst, and thereby safeguard our fellow little one in Christ?

And that's the last paragraph of our text, isn't it? If you care about the life together of repentance and forgiveness, it looks like this:

... being honest enough and respecting the weight of sin enough to actually warn your brother in Christ about it. To gently, patiently go to him – not to criticize and blame and condemn – but to tell him, make him aware of it, and help him remove the sin that threatens to smother him. (Yes, sin smothers. Even the little gossip here or the little spat there... are those sins not equally sin in the sight of God, sin that needed Christ's rich blood to atone for it? So why treat it as if Christ overreacted by dying for that sin?)

So, if your brother sins against *you* (notice, it is not your vocational duty to get involved with your brother's *every* sin), but if he sins against *you*, go to him... and if you have sinned against him, do not be so pridefully offended that he would do as Jesus commanded him to do and come show you your sin that you might be rescued from its weight and pending condemnation.

And, imagine the joy for fellow sinners when there is reconciliation – a joy not only that there is love for and peace with each other – but, far more importantly that there is a justified standing before the almighty God. Yes, what the death of Christ purchased and empowers – this is it 'in real time' ... the forgiveness of sins.

But what if your fellow little baptized will not listen to you (for, we all know children can be stubborn!)? If he will not listen, Jesus says, bring one or two others – not to condemn – but to substantiate the claim and concern of the one sinned against and to help walk the offender *out of* a sin that is building up into stubborn pride... and walk him *into* the light and joy of repentance and forgiveness, where – again – there is now great rejoicing.

But, if his stubbornness has now heaped sin upon sin and he will not listen to three of you, now bring it to the Church. Notice what Jesus says here: the power of the forgiveness of sin – the Office of the Keys – truly and certainly resides with the congregational life together. Where the Church has together done its duty to call a faithful pastor, the pastor proclaims the judgment of the congregation and, what’s more, of Christ himself.

With what patience and longsuffering does God desire that not one little one will perish! As we are becoming stubborn in our sin, He does not say, “Forget it. It’s not worth the effort” and let us remain in our sin. Rather, He says, “This is so important for this one’s salvation, so potentially injurious to this one’s eternal well-being, that it demands the attention of his fellow sheep as they desire for him the forgiveness of sins and a clear conscience before God.” So, it comes to the attention of the congregation – not that they might shame him and embarrass him and make a public spectacle of him – but that they might make one final plea for him to understand just

how seriously he is pitting himself against Christ and how close he is to cutting himself off from eternal life.

And so, with heartache and tears, the congregation pleads with the now-stubborn sinner; and what joy if finally the Law breaks through and his near-petrified heart softens, and repentance is met by God's grace because God does not remember the recent stubbornness more than He remembers the long-ago sacrifice of His Son.

But, if the sinner will *not* repent, then the words up above – “better to cut off a member of your body than to enter into the eternal fire” – then those quite serious words come rushing back and the congregation (the body of Christ) must realize that its own safety is in peril if it allows the sin of the member to remain and infect the whole body. And so, for the safety of the body, the gangrene member is cut off. Such is the *love* of Excommunication. To be sure, Excommunication has been terribly mishandled: in harshness, the penitent are thrown out, in a rush to judgment, the innocent are thrown out, in the papacy's sinful safeguarding of power, Luther found himself thrown out! ...

But abusing Excommunication isn't corrected by never using Excommunication, for the *true* act is no mere earthly shunning, as if a fallout between members of a card-playing club... rather, it too is the supernatural work of heaven: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” That cancerous impenitent may flee to another

congregation, try to erase his past by that congregation's ignorance of it, but he has not outrun his sin.

But, just as Jesus says, "Whatever you bind," – take heart! – He continues "whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." And he entrusts those divine keys of forgiveness to even the smallest congregation: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." Even the tiniest country parishes carry the full authority of heaven. Which means you can be certain that as the words of forgiveness have been proclaimed to you this morning, as the body and blood of our incarnate God sustains you in that forgiveness and life here in a few moments, and as the life together of repentance and forgiveness toward one another continues to be inhaled and exhaled in this congregation – you can be sure, absolutely certain, that such things carry divine weight before the judgment seat of God, and that the Father himself, with all his angels, *rejoices* over your life together in Christ Jesus.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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