

A Little Child: The Greatest in the Kingdom

Matthew 18:1-5

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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He was hailed as the greatest cartoonist ever. I refer, of course, to Charles Schultz who retired a few years ago and then, tragically, died the night before his last Peanuts strip appeared in the Sunday comics. It was Charles Schultz who made us admit that for all our education and sophistication we are still afraid deep down that no one likes us. Even as adults we are eager to kick footballs of one kind or another even though we know they will be snatched away from us at the last second. Do you remember how Charlie Brown went trick or treating on Halloween? All his pals filled their bags with candy and goodies, but when Charlie looked in his he said, "All I got was a rock."² And doesn't that happen to us too when we dream big dreams? Sometimes all we get in the end is a rock. Charles Schultz told it like it is, didn't he? Why else was Peanuts read by 355 million people in 2600 newspapers covering 75 countries and 21 languages? Why else would Peanuts still be published in the Washington Post and many other papers several years after Schultz's death? Charles Schultz reminded us that we are still little kids at heart, hoping to be noticed, wanting to be loved.

When the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest?" they sound like Charlie Brown asking Lucy how to be more popular with the other kids. And they sound like us because this is THE PERENNIAL QUESTION: WHO IS THE GREATEST? Tomorrow morning hordes of children will descend on school playgrounds, wanting to be the first to kick a soccer goal. Over at Wilson High School, seniors intent on winning scholarships will compete for the highest grades, while athletes at Georgetown jockey for a place in the NBA. In Iowa tomorrow evening, the Democratic Party will try to predict who will be the greatest vote-getter in the upcoming primary race.

Who is the greatest? In March, Hollywood will tell us which is the greatest film of 2003: Master and Commander, The Return of the King, or Seabiscuit. I'd be a happy camper if any of those won the Oscar.

Who is the greatest? The Arts and Entertainment channel fills many evenings with hour-long documentaries of film stars, political figures, professional athletes, and even notorious gangsters. TIME magazine puts the Man of the Year on the cover of its year-end issue and Fortune annually unveils America's greatest money makers.

I have a confession to make. I became a Presbyterian thirty-four years ago in part because I thought Presbyterians were a cut above people in other denominations, and I wanted to be among the greatest. And apparently I was not alone because for many decades in this country there was a phenomenon called "Upward Switching."² When Baptists got a better job they switched upward to the Methodist Church. And when Methodists graduated from the university, they became Presbyterians. And when Presbyterians earned enough to join the country club, they became Episcopalians. I swallowed that myth and decided to switch upward at least as far as the Presbyterians. But guess what? Presbyterians look a lot like the Methodists over on New Mexico Avenue and the Baptists across the street. Presbyterians are not better than, smarter than, or greater than anyone else. I have it on the authority of Jesus that no one is ahead of anyone else in this pilgrimage that we call the Christian way.

In a world where the greatest are known by their political power and physical prowess, by their wealth, beauty, brains, and eloquence, Jesus picks out someone who, as Dale Bruner puts it, "is striking for being unstriking."² "He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'"^{1,2}

Who is the greatest? HERE IS THE PARADOXICAL ANSWER: THE SMALLEST ARE THE GREATEST. In God's eyes, the little are big, the least are best. But what does that mean, exactly? Bruner puts it this way: "Jesus wants no Great People; only disciples."² And disciples, by definition, are like little children learning their lessons. To put it another way, children are amateurs. Children know they haven't arrived yet, so they are open to new ideas, ready to experiment with new things, eager to go on adventures, not worried if they get dirty along the way. I am, after all these years, still an amateur Minister of Word and Sacrament. When I arrived at National Church I told the staff and elders, "I've had over forty years of pastoral experience...elsewhere. I've had zero pastoral experience at National Presbyterian."² And because every church is organized differently, because every church does its ministry differently, I asked them to train me so I would not get in the way of what Jesus Christ is doing here.

In his call to be childlike Jesus is not suggesting that we be child-ish. Being messy and disobedient, that's child-ish. Throwing tantrums and toys, tracking mud on clean carpets and drawing stick figures on the wallpaper, that's child-ish. In contrast, to be child-like is to be open to schooling, eager to learn, ready to admit we don't know it all. To be child-like is to confess that, in relation to our Savior, we are mere novices, tenderfoots, neophytes, greenhorns. So the paradoxical answer to the perennial question of greatness is this: "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."²

And that leads, finally, to the PREVAILING CHALLENGE: WHOEVER WELCOMES ONE SUCH CHILD IN MY NAME, WELCOMES ME. It is this prevailing challenge that led some of you to adopt unwanted children. It is this prevailing challenge that prompts others to be foster parents, to be big brothers and big sisters, to work with Boy and Girl Scouts, and to coach in Little League. It is this prevailing challenge that created the National Presbyterian School, and that motivates many of you to teach year after year in our Sunday school. It is this prevailing challenge that brings infants to the baptismal font where we testify to them and to the world that they are loved by their Savior long before they are aware of it.

And, it is this prevailing challenge that calls each and every one of you to welcome yourself as a little child, that is, to go on growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. However silver our hair, however slow our gait, we are little more than toddlers

in God's eyes, still learning to walk in faith, still practicing our spiritual ABCs.

In Wallace Stegner's novel, "A Shooting Star," Sabrina and Barbara spend an afternoon reminiscing about their childhood experiences at summer camp. They become children again, laughing over their battle to win the Good Camper Medal: the swimming race, the canoe competition, the fishing contest, neatness and bed making. Suddenly Barbara's children burst into the room, ³all of them dressed up in suits and dresses and with vast adult shoes tied on their feet. CLook at them¹ Sabrina said. CThat's the real pleasure of childhood, you can be anybody you want to. You can be Mama just by wading around in high-heeled shoes, and Papa by snipping a mustache off the dust mop. When you grow up you get stuck with yourself.¹²

You get stuck with yourself? No, Sabrina was wrong. You need be stuck with yourself only if you are stuck on yourself, only if you think you already know it all. The truth is, you can be what God wants you to be if you will humble yourself as a little child. Become a life long disciple. Become a perennial amateur, never arriving, always growing, ever learning, and (once again I have it on the authority of Jesus) "You will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."