

JEALOUS JESUS

Matthew 18:1-20

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

September 10, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 18, verses 1 through 20. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 18, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

⁷ "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! ⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

¹⁰ "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

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Jesus makes some rather extreme statements in this text. And this gives us a window into the heart of Jesus. If someone is even-keeled, moderate, and restrained all of the time, you might not know what they really think. But if, all of the sudden, that person says something really extreme, then you know what they really think. And it does more than reveal what they really think, but it reveals what they are really passionate about. They must really care about something if their passion breaks through their restraint. And when you find out what someone really hates, then you might also find out what they really love.

It's not really out of character for Jesus to say something extreme, or, at least, something that we would consider extreme. This is the same Jesus who tells us to eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:54). It's the same Jesus who called Peter, "**Satan**" (Matt. 16:23). He called the religious leaders a "**brood of vipers**" (Matt. 12:34; 23:33). It's the same Jesus who commands us to take up our crosses and follow him (Matt. 16:24). And he has a few more extreme statements in this text.

In our culture, there is a perception of Jesus where he is meek and mild. But if you actually read the gospels, you find a very different Jesus. He can be harsh, offensive, and extreme.

In this text, especially, the extreme statements reveal the heart of Jesus. They show us what he really cares about, what he's passionate about more than anything else. Jesus is passionate about his children. He is jealous for his children.

When Jesus says something extreme, like, "**It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea**" (18:6), or, "**Cut [your hand or your foot] off and throw it away**" (18:8), we might think that he's being hyperbolic. That is, maybe he's exaggerating for the sake of effect. But he's not. He is being completely literal. When we sit with this passage for a little bit, and we think about why he says what he says, it actually makes sense. If we valued the same things that Jesus values, his statements here would not seem extreme at all. We would actually find them to be quite reasonable.

It starts with the disciples seeking glory from Jesus. We saw the same attitude from Peter in last week's gospel lesson. Peter rebuked Jesus for his intention to go to the cross (16:21-22). Peter wanted something different from Jesus. Peter wanted Jesus to claim an earthly throne in Jerusalem. But Jesus rebuked Peter for setting his mind on the things of man instead of the things of God (16:23). The other disciples, apparently, wanted the same thing. They asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (18:1). Of course, there's an agenda to their question, and it's not hard to see. They want to be the greatest. And, naturally, they think they have a right to it. They're the twelve who have followed Jesus. Jesus specifically chose them. And when others went away and no longer followed Jesus, they remained. They are the close, personal friends of Jesus. Whenever and however he comes into his kingdom, certainly, he must have a special place for them in that kingdom. They were thirsty for glory.

But Jesus did not give them the answer they wanted. He put a child before them and said, "**Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**" (18:3-4).

So who is the greatest? It's not just a matter of who is the greatest in the kingdom, it's a matter of even entering the kingdom in the first place. The proud will not enter the kingdom. Those who seek their own glory will not enter the kingdom. But the kingdom is for children. It is

for those who humble themselves like children. Those are the ones who enter the kingdom, and they are the greatest in the kingdom.

So what does this mean? What does it mean to turn and become like a child? It sounds hard to do. It's kind of like when Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. Nicodemus was confused. He asked if a person is supposed to enter into his mother's womb a second time (John 3:3-4). That just doesn't make any sense. So also here. What, am I supposed to quit my job, move back into my parents' house, and wear onesie pajamas again? What does it mean to turn and become like children?

Some say it means that we're supposed to have simple, child-like faith. That's kind of on the right track. If that means that we are supposed to trust God, even when it doesn't make sense to us, that's true. But sometimes people say that child-like faith means we shouldn't get too concerned with doctrine. We should just keep it simple. That's not right at all. Have you ever met a child? They are filled with questions. They want to know how everything works. They want to know where everything comes from. They want to know the exact reason for everything you do. They love learning. And if you start talking about God with children, they become more interested in doctrine than most grown-ups are. Child-like faith hungers for the knowledge of God. We should all have that.

So that's part of child-like faith. But the big part is this: dependence. We tend to think of faith as something we control. And that's really dangerous. We think that we can examine all the evidence for something, and then decide whether or not to trust it. That is, we place our faith in that person or thing. But Christian faith is different. Christian faith is like the faith a child has in her parents. She didn't interview her parents and compare them with other candidates in order to determine the right set to place her trust in. No; a child trusts her parents because they are her parents. She's dependent on them. She has no choice, and that's the point. She's simply dependent on them. That's the nature of the relationship.

But we crave independence and glory. We don't want to need God. From the very first sin in the Garden of Eden, we have wanted to be free from God. Remember what the serpent said, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen.3:4-5). Instead of being under his authority, she wanted to be on the same level as God. And ever since then, we have desired the same thing. When we're children, we want to grow up and become independent of our parents. We don't want to live under their authority. We want to do what we want, and we want to earn our status in life. But then we grow up and realize it's not that great. So also, as children of God, we should be content under his authority, but we are often not. We want to live by our own rules. And we want to have our own successes and be measured by those. We want independence and glory. But Jesus says no. **"Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** The only way to enter the kingdom of heaven is as a child, a child of God. That means that we are constantly dependent on him, and our glory is not our own, but we share in his glory. We grow and mature in the faith. We should grow in our knowledge of God. We should grow in our love for him and for others. But we never grow out of childhood. Because to grow out of childhood would mean that we grow out of his loving protection, and we would never survive without it. We must remain children in the kingdom of God.

This is good for us, and it is the only safe way to live and enter into the kingdom of heaven, because Jesus is jealous for his children. It's a good kind of jealousy. We usually have a negative connotation when we use or hear the word "jealousy." But sometimes jealousy is appropriate.

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It's a strong desire to have or to keep something. And Jesus has a strong jealousy for you. He desires to have and keep you so that the devil will not steal and destroy you through sin and death. It's a protective kind of jealousy, like the kind loving parents have for their children. And it's intense. That's why Jesus says the things he says here. When you know why someone says or does something, it can change your entire outlook.

Here's an example. Suppose you see two guys fighting. And the one guy, especially, is really fighting hard. He's intense. He's not giving up. Now you see this fight, what would you think about this guy? You might think, *this guy has a lot of hate*. And that could be true. He might have a lot of hate for the other guy. But then you see that this guy, the one who's fighting really hard, has a family. There's a wife and children there, and the other guy is trying to harm them. Now you see that the first guy is not fighting out of hate, but love. His love for his family manifests itself as hate for everything that might harm them. He is jealous for them. And this is how Jesus is jealous for you.

So Jesus says, **"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea"** (18:6). Millstones are big, round stones used for grinding wheat into flour. They're massive, several feet in diameter. One person could not lift one. Jesus talks about it being fastened around someone's neck and drowning him in the sea. That sounds extreme. I mean, a couple cinder blocks should do the trick. Why is Jesus so intense? Because the stakes are so high.

When Jesus talks about causing a little one who believes in him to sin, he's not talking about one individual sin. He's talking about something much more serious. He doesn't use the ordinary word for sin. It's different. The Greek word here is *σκανδαλίζω*. It's where we get our English words "scandal" and "scandalize." It means to cause someone to stumble. In the case of Christian faith, it means to cause someone to fall away from the faith. So it does not mean that you cause a child to commit one individual sin. Every parent has done that. You give a child too much sugar before bedtime, and you are the cause for much disobedience. Or maybe you snap at your child in frustration, and then they start acting out. Those are individual sins, and that's not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about causing a child, or anyone who believes in him, to stumble into unbelief. A scandal is something that causes someone to not trust you anymore. If a politician or a celebrity has a scandal, it means that they say or do something that causes people to not trust them anymore. And the kind of scandal Jesus is talking about is when we say or do something that causes his beloved children to not trust him anymore. So if the church or a parent abuses a child so that they can't conceive of a loving God, and they fall away from trusting in Jesus, that's a scandal. Or if we baptize our children, but never teach them the Christian faith, so that, instead of growing up in Jesus, they fall away from him, that would be a scandal.

So listen again to what Jesus says, and this is a more literal translation: **"Whoever scandalizes one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."**

There are things worse than death, and that's Jesus point. It is better to die than to cause someone to fall away from the faith, because that means eternal death. So when Jesus talks about the millstone, he's not prescribing it as a sentence for someone who causes a scandal. He's saying that it would have been better for that person to die before they had the opportunity to scandalize one of his children.

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The same is true for your hand or your foot or your eye. “If your hand or your foot scandalizes you, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye scandalizes you, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire” (18:8-9).

Now, it’s probably not actually your hand, foot, or eye that scandalizes you. God made those things. He gave them to you. And he wants you to have them. But if they did actually scandalize you into unbelief, it would be very reasonable to do exactly what Jesus says. More likely, there are other things that scandalize you. Any temptation to sin can scandalize us by drawing our hearts away from the one true God. If things on the internet scandalize you, you should cut it off. If alcohol tempts you to do things you otherwise would not do, you should cut it off. If social media causes you to insult other people, you should cut it off. If watching political news causes you to trust in human saviors instead of the one true God, you should cut it off. If anything tempts you to sin or causes you to trust in something other than the one true God, you should cut it off.

The devil uses temptations to draw us away from our Savior. His goal is not really to get you to commit one individual sin. His goal is to use those sins to drag us into unbelief. He does this with habitual sins when we think that we’ve done it one too many times. We think that God won’t forgive us again, or we’re just too ashamed to confess the same sins again. Have you ever felt that way? I bet you have. That is how those things become scandals. The devil tempts us to believe that we cannot or will not be forgiven. But that’s a lie. God is always gracious. It is always his desire to forgive. So do not listen to the devil, and take whatever means necessary to remove his scandals from your life. These things are worse than death.

It is better to die than to be separated from God. And, you know, Jesus applied that principle in his own death. Jesus says all these difficult things, because he is jealous for you. He is so jealous for you that he would rather die than let you be separated from him. He would rather have a millstone hung around his neck and be drowned than have you separated from him. But, of course, it wasn’t a millstone. That would have been a quick death. His was much worse. And he would rather have his hand or foot cut off than lose you. But they weren’t cut off. They were nailed to a cross. They didn’t just kill his hand or foot and toss it aside. They killed his whole body. He was cut off from the land of the living (Is. 53:8).

Jesus is jealous for you. He fights for you. And he’s really intense about it. He does not want anything to tear you away from his Kingdom. He wants to give you his Kingdom. He wants your sins to be forgiven. He wants your body to be raised from the dead. He wants you to have eternal life. He wants to share his glory with you forever. This is what Jesus is jealous for. This is why he warns us about scandals. And this is why he gave his own life for you. He wants you to be with him, his Father, and the Holy Spirit in his Kingdom forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.