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TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 12th March 2023, Lent 3

Becoming Little by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

Gospel reading: Matthew 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 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. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What do you preach on for your first sermon in a place?

There's this unspoken expectation that it should be something amazingly profound. But there's a real risk that it becomes more about me than about the living God in whose presence we gather. The living God who has shaped this community by Word and Spirit since its beginnings and who will continue to shape it long after my time here has come to an end. Today is not about me. So, if you find today's sermon thoroughly underwhelming, boring, forgettable... well, let's say that's intentional to draw attention away from me!

The reading we heard today is taken from Matthew's gospel. And I chose it because this is the Year of Matthew in the Church's calendar. It's an opportunity to go deep into the wisdom Matthew has to offer the church. And so, as we journey through the season of Lent and approach the cross, I've been asking, what does Matthew have to tell us about being a community shaped by the cross of Christ? As I read Matthew's gospel, chapter 18 seemed like a logical place to begin. And that's because chapter 18 is an extended dialogue between Jesus and his disciples that takes place shortly after Jesus announces that he is to suffer and die. In other words, this is Matthew's way of exploring what it means to be a community oriented towards the suffering and death of Jesus. What it means to be a community of the cross.

So, we're going to sit in chapter 18 for three weeks. And we begin here with a question posed by the disciples: who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? In response, Jesus introduces an image that flips the question on its head. And it's an image which recurs multiple times throughout the chapter: the image of a little child. The emphasis is on the littleness because, as the chapter goes on, he uses a term that literally translates as "little ones". The Greek word is mikros, from which we get the word micro – tiny, little. So, this is the central image that Matthew uses to talk about what it means to be shaped by the cross. We are to be tiny, little, insignificant, small. And it's in response to that question posed by the disciples: who is the greatest?

It's a question of power, isn't it? Greatest is a comparative term. It means bigger, better, greater, more influential than everyone else. It's about power. Matthew is addressing the question of power in the early church. Who has it? Who lacks it? And where is Christ in the midst of these power dynamics? And while Matthew is talking to the early church, it's a timeless and universal question. One that continues to be relevant today.

There are power dynamics in every human community, every human relationship. Whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. We all have power and exert power or influence over others. And conversely, power is exerted over us. By people, by structures and systems, the invisible forces at play. The church is no different. Except that it strikes me that the church is the place where, because of the one we follow – the crucified Christ –, we are compelled to not only acknowledge the power dynamics, but to seek to address them, to turn them on their head.

And so we're told to welcome the little ones, the insignificant ones, the unseen ones. And even more than that, for those of us that have a great

degree of power, there is a challenge to seek to give away the influence and power we do have in loving service of one another. To become little that others may be built up. This instinct to become little is bound up with the very act of Christian worship. It's an instinct that is steeped in our weekly rhythm of worship and reaches all the way back into the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament – the ancient Hebrew worldview. Take, for instance, Psalm 95 which we've been using as a guide for our worship this morning. It begins as a fairly typical Psalm of praise – of giving glory and honour to God, who is the creator of heaven and earth. As we sung: *Let us bow down in worship to the Lord. Let us kneel before our Maker. For we are people under God's care and sheep in God's pasture.*

In light of Matthew 18, I realised the act of bowing down and kneeling is an act of making yourself small. Have you ever thought about it that way? I wonder if that act of kneeling embodies why we're called to praise. It's not like praise changes God. God doesn't need our praise. And if we stay silent, even the rocks will cry out in praise. Praise is built into the very fabric of the universe – regardless of whether we do it or not. But when we give praise to God, I think something profound happens in us. In that when we make God big, when we magnify God, we become aware of our smallness. When we acknowledge that God is God, we are also confessing that we are not. That we are human: mortal, vulnerable, dependent – on God the Maker and on the earth on which we kneel and to which we shall one day return. And Matthew I think is saying that, when we become little, something changes in us that affects profoundly how we relate to one another in community. And even further how we relate to Mother Earth and the creaturely world we've subjected to our needs.

Something happens when we kneel bringing our faces close to the earth. Something happens when we become little, when we bring ourselves down to the level of those who are little in order that they may be built up. In short, the church is called to become a different sort of community. A little community. One that treads lightly. One that is learning to become more fully and vulnerably human.

The next couple of weeks we're going to be exploring the implications of becoming little. It's a message we need to hear time and again. Clearly the disciples didn't get it! Having spent years following Jesus, they're still preoccupied with the question of greatness. And Matthew gives this prominence – I suspect – because it's a question that was continuing to plague the early church!

And I would argue that it's a question that has continued to plague the church throughout history. The question of power and power abuse. We've got the question wrong, Matthew's saying! Following the crucified Jesus has never been about who is the greatest. Who's the most holy. The most godlike. Being a community of the cross is not about us becoming great like God. But about God becoming small like us. In Christ, God has taken on our humanity, "emptied himself" as Paul might put it, become small.

In Christ, God shows us what it is to be truly human, giving up his life, serving in love, even when it leads to suffering and death.

In Christ, the humanity of God is made known.

And so today, we are invited to take hold of Christ's humanity, to share in it. In the sharing of this meal, there's a promise: that we are united in him by the Spirit finding our common humanity, our common creatureliness, before our loving Father in heaven.

So let us become little together that we may welcome Christ in. Amen.
