

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“This Child, and This Child, and This Child”
Matthew 16: 18: 1-14
14th Sunday After Pentecost
September 10, 2017**

One of the unique features which distinguishes the Gospel according to Matthew from the other gospels is that the gospel writer known as Matthew collected teachings from throughout Jesus’s ministry, amassed them into five large sections of instructions, and then located them strategically at places of theological import. Some say that the very fact that there are five sections of teaching material is theologically important as the five sections of instruction were intended by the gospel writer to be a reflective mirror of Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Today’s Scripture lesson is contained in the fourth teaching section, and it is situated significantly at the point where Jesus’s Galilean ministry has come to a conclusion and he is poised to begin his journey to Jerusalem, to the place where, after his suffering, his death, and his resurrection, he will turn over the reins of ministry to his disciples.

It is a teachable moment, not only for the disciples of Jesus’s own day, but for us as his followers in this day. And so, let us listen for Jesus’s word, and for God’s word, to us.



Who is the greatest?

Some say Alabama. Some say Oklahoma. Some say Clemson.

Who is the greatest?

Some say George Washington. Some say Thomas Jefferson. Some say Abraham Lincoln.

Who is the greatest?

Some say Murray. Some say Federer. Some say Nadal.

The gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recount that the disciples asked Jesus the question, Who is the greatest?

In Mark and in Luke, the question comes in the midst of a playground squabble among unruly schoolboy disciples, each of them trying to elbow the other out of the way so that he will be awarded the MVP trophy at Jesus’s award banquet.

In Matthew, however, the question is different.

In Matthew, the question is “Who is the greatest *in the kingdom of heaven?*” And here the question is not a selfish, ego-centered question at all. Here, the question, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is a good question.

Jesus himself had said it back in that first of the five sections of instruction found in the Gospel of Matthew, the section of teaching the church calls The Sermon on the Mount, “whoever does [my commandments] and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Striving to be great in the kingdom of heaven is not a narcissistic aspiration. Rather, it is a worthy goal.

And so when the question comes, Jesus snaps us the opportunity to teach his disciples how to become great in the kingdom of heaven. Picking up a child and placing her in the center of the circle of disciples, he acts out a parable. One becomes great in the kingdom of heaven, he teaches, by becoming like children and by caring for the “little ones.” (1)

Now to understand Jesus’s teaching, it is important for us to know how weak, vulnerable, and, well, lowly children were in Jesus’s day. Tom Long, in his commentary on Matthew, reports that 30% of infants died at birth, another 30% perished by age 6, and a full 60% had died by the age of 16. In a society where few children lived to see adulthood, society was reluctant to place much value on childhood. Children were essentially “nobodies.” (2) Thus, the child that Jesus placed in the center of the circle represented not only children, but anyone in society who was marginalized and dehumanized. And thus, Jesus “big message” in this text, if you will, is a word about the responsibility of those who are more privileged toward those who are less privileged.

There is a big lesson here, but I sense that there is also a small lesson too. And, with this being Rally Day here at Davidson College Presbyterian Church, I have to believe that neither Matthew nor Jesus himself would be offended by our narrowing the focus of Jesus’s larger teaching to a single beam of light illuminating the ways that those who are Christ-followers, particularly those of us who are Christ-followers at DCPC, are called to welcome the children.

On this Rally Day, we celebrate the ways that we at DCPC are being faithful in heeding Jesus’s exhortation, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

Today, we celebrate our partnership with Blythe Elementary School. It was not so long ago that a group of people inspired by the stories of other public school and house of worship partnerships in the Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools gathered to talk about the possibilities of our entering into such a partnership. I knew that the Holy Spirit was up to something around here when at the close of the second meeting of interested persons, the question was posed about leadership, and, to quote our member Leah Chester-Davis who has written a great piece on the partnership which appears in the current issue of our PCUSA denominational magazine *Presbyterians Today* “quicker than a third-grader bolting for the playground at recess” two busy people Rosemary Klein and Catherine Bragg volunteered to lead the effort. It has been amazing. The DCPC team has listened to what the school needs, and hundreds of you have been involved in this ministry in one way or another—providing food during the summer for Blythe families, hosting teacher appreciation lunches and Mother’s Day teas, donating books, building raised beds for a school garden, volunteering in the classroom, and so much more. (3) And there is always more to do, so please let Catherine or Rosemary know if you are interested in

becoming more involved. [Principal Felisa Simpson was present at worship and stated that 42 volunteers are needed to read with a student for one hour per week.]

Today, we also celebrate faith formation here at DCPC. Again, it was not so long ago that the Session made a commitment to strengthen our faith formation for children and youth by calling a staff associate for youth ministry, a staff associate for children's ministry, and an associate pastor for faith formation. These DCPC ministries were good; now with the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love that Matt, Jenny, and John have brought, we are building upon a great legacy of Christian education as DCPC moves into the future amid a rapidly changing, challenging world.

There is also additional good news to share: that DCPC is the recipient of a \$30,000 grant from Union Presbyterian Seminary which includes a contribution from the Thomason Foundation of Shreveport, Louisiana, to enable Claire George-Drumheller to engage in full-time PCUSA ministry to Davidson college students.

One new ministry about which we are especially excited this fall is the Kids Club which kicked off last Wednesday evening. Children converged here at DCPC after school -coming from all the many schools that DCPC kids attend—in carpools, on the church bus which picked up Davidson Elementary School students, or ferried by parents, grandparents, stepparents, and friends. They snacked and played and then engaged in a beautiful experience of faith formation called the Way of the Child which is a calm, quiet, meditative approach (something for which children and adults so yearn in our fast-paced lived) in which children learn that Jesus loves them, as the choir has sung, and calls them to be his disciples. And then some went off to sing with Jane and David and Elizabeth, and others went to the homework room where Davidson College students were there to assist, and then on to dinner (get those reservations in!) which closed with worship.

There is a parallel between our Wednesday faith formation opportunities and how what we now know as Sunday School began. During the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700's when children were working in factories on weekdays, Robert Raikes began the movement to teach children to read and thus to receive religious instruction as they read the Bible, meeting on Sundays, the one day of the week when the children weren't working. It occurs to me that in the same manner that Robert Raikes and others looked at his societal context and imagined how the church of his day would respond faithfully to Jesus's words, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," DCPC is considering our present-day societal context of busy families in a challenging world that pulls them in multiple directions even on the weekend and not only imagining but bringing to reality a DCPC response to Jesus's teaching.

DCPC is investing in the future as we fund this important ministry to and with children, youth, college students. If you take into account our preschool ministry, our music ministry, our program budgets for these ministries, and the funding for staff...then the total that we are investing on an annual basis is between \$300,000-400,000. I mention this because the time is drawing near when you will be asked to make a financial pledge to Davidson College Presbyterian Church. DCPC's faith formation ministry is worth your sacrificial, financial investment.

I will close by referencing briefly Jesus's rather stern warning that is included in today's Scripture lesson...about how if disciples put a stumbling block in front of the little ones, it would be better if a great rock were fastened around our necks and we were thrown into the storm surge of the hurricane. Did I say a little harsh?!!!

And it's true, we need to do everything in our power not to cause anybody—young or old—to stumble in knowing God, loving God, and serving God. But if the truth be told, we are going to fail and fall short and trip up somewhere along the line. (4) But what Jesus means for us to see, I believe, is that when we do stumble or cause someone else to stumble, we don't sit passively by, we don't whine and fret, but we keep at it with all the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love which the Holy Spirit gives to us as free and undeserved gift. We keep our gaze above the horizon of the world's imperfections, beholding out there in the distance God's vision of the world as it will be when God is finished with the world and with us and recommitting ourselves with each dawning day to joining Christ is creating the world that God is still shaping (5), always remembering that to be great in the kingdom of heaven is not to flag in welcoming and caring for the children.

1. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 203.
2. *Ibid.*, 204.
3. Leah Chester-Davis, "Supporting our public schools: Kids respond to people who care," *Presbyterians Today*, August/September 2017, 10-11.
4. Long, 207.
5. Theodore J. Wardlaw, "Be among the indispensable," *Windows*, Summer/Fall 2017, 7.