

Scripture Readings for September 6th

Psalms 32:1-7(ESV) ¹Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. ⁶Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. ⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.

Ezekiel 33:7-9(ESV) ⁷“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

Romans 13:1-10(ESV) ¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. ⁸Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Rev. Gary Lewis Hendrickson

September 5/6, 2020

Lutheran Church

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Define Greatness

Matthew 18:1-20 (ESV) ¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶but 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! ⁸And 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. ⁹And 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. 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. ¹²What 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? ¹³And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So 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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly, 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. ¹⁹Again 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

How much better than simply being “good” does a person have to be before he or she might be considered to be “great?” In common language of our day, we use that term “great” rather loosely to embellish a compliment we may wish to extend. I might tell someone that my wife is a “good” cook, but if she were listening and I wanted to add to the compliment, I might easily boast that she is a “great” cook! Still, that would only be a private compliment—just something that was intended to be between her and me. Just because I thought she was a “great” cook would not hold any meaningful standing in the real world. But there are many people to whom the title of “Great” has been appended by the world’s historians. And their assessment has been generally accepted by everyone.

Going back into the historical archives, we can trace where the term “Great” was added to someone’s name. It seems to have originated as a simplification of the Persian title “Great King. It was first used by Cyrus II of Persia—and then inherited, so to speak, by Alexander III of Macedon when he “put the sword” to the mighty Persian Empire. Throughout history, we find the title of “The Great” added to the name of many notable personalities. Some added the title to their name by their own accord to publicize their perceived superiority. Others had it appended by those who appreciated their individuality. Some of these people were mighty conquerors, some were benevolent rulers, some were notably wise, some were remembered for their service to the Church, and there are some who have the title associated with their names—but they are pretty much forgotten in present day society. In one of the towns where I served as pastor we had “Gregory the Great” Roman Catholic Church. The appendage to Pope Gregory’s name remains well-known to this day. Other famous names of history, like Charlemagne, are remembered—but few know that Charlemagne translated is actually “Charles the Great.”

One of the first Table Prayers I learned as a child was, “God is great and God is good; we thank Him for this food; by His name we all are fed, Lord give us our daily bread. Amen.” Not long after I learned this prayer, we were visiting my mom’s sister in western Minnesota. My aunt was married to a dentist—and everyone just called him, “Doc.” Besides being a dentist, my uncle “Doc” liked to cook. On the first day we were there, I watched “Doc” get everything ready for the meal as my mom and her sister visited in another room. It was an elaborate spread with plenty to eat for everyone—and then some. As we sat down to eat, my mom—proud that I had just learned this Table Prayer—asked if

I could pray the blessing for the food. My aunt and uncle agreed; and all eyes looked at me for an indication that I was ready to begin. I folded my hands and bowed my head—and I assumed that everyone else did the same. Based on my observations that day, I prayed the prayer that I thought was appropriate. I began, “Doc is great and Doc is good; we thank him for this food; by his name we all are fed.” That is about as far as I got because everyone was laughing. Smiles were on every face—except for my mom’s. She was not laughing at all! She looked terribly embarrassed and in no uncertain terms told me to do the prayer right.

Well, I was a little too young to have my theology all in its proper place. I knew that we always thanked God for the food in our house, but all my observations of the day prompted me to thank “Doc” for the food we were going to eat that day. Presumably my uncle “Doc” appreciated the fact that I did notice that he had prepared all the food we were eating. However, the next Table Prayer my mom taught me was in Norwegian. “I Jesu Navn . . .” Because I was only taught a few other words in Norwegian, there was no danger that I would modify the Table Prayer to meet my own perceptions of the day’s events if I was ever asked to pray again in public.

Just as my Table Prayer proclamation didn’t make “Doc” great, neither do most other self-proclamations of greatness. Many in our land do define greatness as the personal accumulation of wealth. If they are able to gather enough money and other tangible securities, they—along with many others—perceive themselves to be great. Others define greatness as the gaining of power—militarily, politically, secularly, or even in the church. There are still others who define greatness by the number of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren they have. Their reasoning apparently follows the presumption: what could be greater than many offspring?

The disciples of Jesus wanted a definition of greatness on the day of our text, so they came to their Lord with the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” We immediately notice that the disciples were not concerned with greatness measured by earthly standards. They already knew how the world generally defined greatness. But now they were inquiring about the heavenly standards of greatness. As was often the outcome, the disciples were not expecting the answer Jesus provided.

Children back then, much like present times, had no real social standing. A child’s standing under the law has immensely improved from then to now, but no one today really pays much attention to a child when it comes to important matters. Little children are loved, appreciated, and sources of pride for their families—but we do not let them make their own life-changing decisions, drink, vote, or fight our wars. We expect that the childhood years are to be a time of learning and developing—not years of contributing to the welfare of the family or to society in general. And, children expect to be treated like children rather than like adults. Is it this “expectation,” or lack of it, that contributes to making a child great? Unlike most adults, children do generally comprehend their dependence on someone bigger or greater than they are.

That brings us to question, “Why is humbleness—as exhibited by children—such a virtue? Humbleness certainly is not recognized as a desirable trait by most of our citizens. Instead of being humble, society would suggest that we “toot our own horn” if we want to succeed. The thought behind that expectation is that no one else is going to broadcast your worthiness to the world. If you want others to know that you are worth something, you have to be the announcer. No one is going to do it for you—unless, that is, you decide to bring your mother along with you wherever you go. Jesus

is telling us to be “under cover” so that no one besides the Lord knows the true motivation for what we’re doing.

The humbleness that Jesus is talking about here does not mean that we are being encouraged to sit back and do nothing. Much to contrary! We are called to do a multitude of things, but we are not to depend on our own power. The Lord God is the One who sets our goals and then empowers us to accomplish them in His name. Many folks, when their accomplishments are acknowledged, give all the credit to the Lord with responses like, “Thank you, but it really was the Lord’s doing.” Humbleness has to do with acknowledging our complete dependence on the Lord. All the commendable things we attempt are due to His initiation (Ephesians 2:10) and empowerment (Ephesians 2:8).

In all that I’ve read and heard about Jesus, I don’t recall ever coming across anyone referring to Him as “The Great One.” It’s odd that with all the world leaders and sport stars to whom this tag has been appended, we don’t associate this title with Jesus. Mostly appendages to Jesus’ name come directly from the Scriptures, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” (Isaiah 9:6) rather than something humanity made up. As far as I know, no one ever appended the title of “greatness” to Abraham Lincoln. Yet many, including me, believe our 16th President to have been a great man. To me, it wasn’t the honesty for which he was known, it wasn’t the fact that he became President of our country, it wasn’t because the slaves were freed by his Emancipation Proclamation, rather it was because he was a man of faith. He trusted in his Lord for guidance and strength.

Perhaps that helps to explain why the title “Great” is not often associated with Jesus—because He had an enormous faith. The entire world thought He had failed in His mission when He was crucified and killed on the cross. Many had heard about and seen His miracles, His teachings, His casting out of demons, and even His raising the dead. But when Jesus Himself died, the world figured that this was the end of Him and His ways. They forgot that God’s ways (Romans 11:33) operate differently than we might expect. They didn’t remember that man’s ways are often folly to God (1 Corinthians 3:19). Dying doesn’t seem to be a logical way to become the Savior of the world; yet, that’s exactly what happened. Jesus permitted death to overtake Him as He paid the supreme penalty for all of humanity’s sin and disobedience. Just before Jesus died on the cross, He spoke these words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). But not even death itself could keep Jesus in the grave. On the third day, He rose triumphantly from the tomb to proclaim His complete, total, and everlasting victory over sin, death, and the devil. A victory that He offers to share with everyone who will but believe and trust in Him for their salvation.

Greatness is dependence. There is someone who is greater than any of us. And that someone has a name; we refer to Him as God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Do you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven? Depend completely on Jesus for your salvation. You will not be disappointed.