

O, To Be A Child Again

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Job 23: 20-28; Psalm 27:1-6; James 3:13-18; Mark 9:30-37.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

If you could write your own epitaph, what would you like to have said about you? Lloyd J. Ogilvie, minister at the Hollywood Presbyterian Church, was walking through a cemetery near his home and found a tombstone with a memorable epitaph. Underneath the man's name, the date of his birth and death, was an inscription we'd all like to have. The words were deeply cut into the magnificent marble, "He was a great person!" I wonder what the man had been like and what he'd accomplished to deserve such an inscription.

How would you define a great person? By the amount of money they ~~make in a life-time?~~ By their influence on the course of history? By their social status? The kind of house they live in? By their jobs?

Joe Paterno was asked which of his many great teams was the greatest. Keep in mind that Paterno is one of the winningest coaches in collegiate football history. In his twenty years as head coach at Penn State his teams have never had a losing season, have usually been ranked in the top 10, and twice have been named national champions. "Which team was your greatest", a news journalist asked him. His answer? "I won't be able to tell you for about 40 years. The greatest team is not necessarily the team that won the most games or that got ranked number one at the end of the season. The greatest team is the one whose members will have performed the greatest service in their communities, churches, and nation."

Two weeks ago I was visiting some of our shut-ins in nursing homes. And as I visited them I began to realize how great they are even though they can't do many great things in the world's eyes. I think of Mary Rea at

Calvert. For years she taught little children in public school. She never had any children of her own. Some of them have forgotten her but some remember and send her cards and letters. I stopped by to visit Mary for a while. Now Mary's blind. She didn't know for sure who'd come in.

"Hello, I'm pastor Atkinson, how are you?"

"I thought it was about time for you to stop by. How's your wife and your boys. I was praying about them this morning."

"You were?"

"Well yes, I pray for you and your family every day."

Now Mary Rea doesn't have a lot of money to give to the church. She doesn't wield any power and authority in town. She'll never make front page news in the New York Times. But I believe she's a great person in the eyes of God and that one day her greatness will be recognised by all. She performed her humble service teaching children and she still is a servant when she remembers me and Kay and my boys in prayer every morning. When I think of her and the other shut-ins like her I think of Jesus and what he said about greatness.

The disciples had been discussing with one another who was the greatest. And Jesus sat down and called the twelve and said to them, "Anyone who would be first must be last of all and servant of all." We so easily forget or don't want to remember what Jesus said about what it takes to be really great. We knot that Josh Billings was right when he said, "The more humble a person is before God, the more will that person be exalted. The more humble a person is before other men and women, the more will that person get rode roughshod."

"And Jesus took a child, and put the child in themidst of them; and taking the child in his arms, Jesus said to them, 'Whoever receives one

such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me." Now in the days of Jesus children were nobodies. They were to be neither seen or heard. They wielded no influence. Children are people who need help, who don't know much. They are insignificant in the eyes of the world. This saying of Jesus may have been used in the early church to justify the baptism of infants. But sometimes new Christians were called children. So what Jesus is saying is that a Christian achieves greatness not by holding great offices but by doing services to insignificant people such as a child.

When I hear that I think of our Sunday school teachers. Some of our Sunday school teachers teach in public schools all week and then they're crazy enough to teach in Sunday School. Several of our classes last week had 25 or more children in them with only one teacher. These teachers don't get paid and the kids don't have to be there. The teachers can't send disciplinary problems to the principals office. When you read the back of our bulletin you'll see my name displayed prominently at the top (as well as our elders and deacons) but you won't see the names of the Sunday School teachers very often but they are among the greatest people in this congregation because they're teaching our children about Jesus.

"Whoever receives one such child receives me", Jesus said. When I hear Jesus say that I also think of parents, and especially single parent families. I think of the single mothers and fathers who after working all week get up on Sunday morning, get their kids ready for Sunday School and church and bring them. On Sunday morning it sure would be nice to take a day off and sleep in. But they get up. Now I know what it's like in our home on Sunday mornings. It's a madhouse getting up, getting the boys dressed and fed and washed as well as getting ourselves ready. Every

week it seems we're racing the clock and we often don't make it on time. I'm driving down the road at 60 miles an hour shouting at the top of my lungs, "What do you mean you forgot your Sunday School school offering." We're a husband and wife team but we still find Sunday morning hectic. And then I think of the the single parent families. I think of the mothers and fathers who do this without the support of a spouse. How do they do it? They're among the great ones that Jesus spoke of. They may never be named as the parent of the year, they may be struggling to make ends meet... but in the eyes of God they're really the great ones.

"Whoever receives one child in my name receives me," Jesus said. When I hear Jesus say that I think of the people in this congregation who make newcomers welcome. Newcomers and visitors often feel insignificant and overlooked. Sometimes they don't return to church and Sunday School because they don't know what's going on. They may not know the Bible that well and are afraid of looking stupid when they're looking for the Gospel of John in the OT part of the Bible. They feel out of it if they don't know the Apostles' Creed or some of our responses. But a person who is great in the eyes of God is someone who welcomes these visitors, who receives them in the name of Jesus and helps them grow in the faith, who perhaps even receives them into their homes to get to know them better.

"Whoever receives one child in my name receives me." When I hear Jesus say that I think of our sexton, Clyde Prigg. I hope you read the articles about him in last weeks Oxford Tribune. For the past twelve years Clyde has been a driving force behind children at Lincoln Community Center. Hundreds of children have benefitted from his volunteering with youth. Clyde has been an integral part of the Lincoln Community Center.

He's helped tutor children, taught swimming, he's been the basketball and track coach and has always provided transportation for children going to the center. Recently Clyde, four young track stars and their parents traveled to Wichita, Kansas and placed ninth in the nation at the AAU National Olympic Championships in the 400 meter relay and the long jump. Clyde sought funding from the Rotary Club, the Lions Club and a very generous anonymous donor to take these young people to Wichita. Clyde will probably never appear on the cover of Time magazine as Man of the Year but a lot of kids in this town think Clyde is the greatest.

Jesus' disciples had a hard time with greatness. They couldn't get it into their heads or hearts what he was talking about when it came to understanding the Kingdom he came to establish. He plainly told them that he'd be delivered into the hands of people who hated him, that they'd kill him and that he'd rise again. But they still thought in terms of a powerful theocracy with Israel victorious over all the nations and with Jesus the messianic king of an earthly domain. The only question that troubled them was the position that they'd have in the kingdom and who'd have the most authority and recognition.

I think most of us, like the disciples, want to be great. I remember as a young boy reading the biographies of four missionaries killed in Ecuador by the Auca Indians. It seemed to me that the only way to be great as a Christian was to give up everything and be a missionary in some exotic and dangerous corner of the world. I thought it would be great to be a missionary in the jungles of Africa or South America, maybe even get martyred. They'd carry my body through swamps and jungles back to civilization and I'd be buried beside David Livingstone in Westminster Abbey and Queen Elizabeth, President Eisenhower, and Billy Graham would

attend my funeral. It never occurred to me that a person could be a great Christian and a factory worker or a cab-driver or a school teacher or waitress.

By the time we hit forty many of our dreams of greatness have been shattered. Sometimes we feel like life has passed us by. And when greatness seems to be beyond our reach, depression sets in and so often people do foolish things. But the Gospel tells us that it's possible for all of us to be great. God can take our failures, our faults, our sorrows and our weaknesses and turn our defeats into great victories. There's nobody whose life can't be changed who will let Christ change it.

At the Last Supper Jesus reminded his apostles, "I am in your midst as the one who serves you." Then as clearly as possible, after washing the feet of his apostles Jesus told them, "Do you understand what I just did for you? You address me as Teacher and Lord, and fittingly enough, for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet-- I who am Teacher and Lord-- then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do."

What is a truly great person? I think that of all people children are best able to recognise a great person when they see one. The other day I asked a young child to name some really great people. He smiled and quickly said, "My mom and dad, Jesus and God." Now mom and dad may be poor, maybe uneducated; maybe out of work; but they're still the greatest in the minds of their children. You see, children know that greatness doesn't lie in any of those things. But as children grow up they learn from adults the world's definition of greatness. They discover that in the adult world the one who has the most money, the biggest house, the most education, the highest social status is the greatest. To be a child is to

have unquestioned trust and regard for your mom and dad. To be a child of God is to have that same kind of regard and trust for God our heavenly father who also, Jesus tells us, is like a mother who longs to gather her children under her arms.

AMEN

Let us pray: Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength to our God for ever and ever. Amen.