

*Texts: Matthew 18:1-9*

*Subject: Who is Greatest?*

*Theme: From the Dust*

*Ash Wednesday; March 6, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus who is the Christ. Amen.

The argument rages on. Who is the greatest?

No, this is not about Jordan or LeBron (we know the answer to that one). This is not about Mohammed Ali - though his nickname of the "Greatest" has stood the test of time. This is not about Billy Joel or Elton John, but my money is on Sir Elton.

The disciples argue about who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. This question has got to be frustrating Jesus to no end. You'd think they would get it by now, after the mountaintop light show, the healing, and feeding, and the teaching about what is going to happen to them in Jerusalem, but Peter and Jesus' friends are still jockeying for position as his inner circle, the ones who will rule with Him when the time comes. It's as if the whole conversation about taking up their cross and following him just totally went over their heads. He told them in the sermon on the mount, that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. You mean they didn't understand? And now they have to figure out what it means to become a child?

One tradition tells that the little one Jesus indicates is Peter's own child. We know from scripture that Peter was married (Matt. 8:14, 1 Cor. 9:5).

We love our children. Ivy and try to listen to them, to hear and understand what they're feeling, to educate them, to nurture their creativity, and encourage them to grow into responsible adults. I think that's pretty standard. In our culture, children are beloved, seen as innocent, pure, and ones to be treasured. In our church, we want

young people to be raised up in faith, to hear and learn the Word of God, to be surrounded by a faithful community, to share Jesus with them, and to present them with opportunities to encounter the holy. But how should we become children? I remember hearing my parents tell me to “act my age!” So to be childlike? How’s that supposed to happen?

Jesus compares his followers to children to say that they are to be *humble* like children. Children in Jesus’ time were valued and loved, but mostly as the potential for future economic growth. They would be workers, citizens, landowners, and the source of care for their aging parents in the future. They didn’t have status or rights, power, or position in the society. In a culture that was structured by position and class, every person had their place. To gain power and wealth, one might host a dinner party, inviting an honored guest to sit at the head of a table. The hosts would be sat nearby, with those of highest position near the head of the table, and those of lower status further away from the guest of honor. Anyone lower would be seated at a different table, and others not invited at all. Do you remember sitting at the children’s table at Thanksgiving dinner when you were young? It was a big deal when you were invited to sit at the table with the grown-ups!

Jesus teaches that seeking personal gain, power, and status, in order to dominate others is the opposite of what his followers are to do. Jesus’ reign in the kingdom turns the social order upside down to place the least at the place of honor. Jesus’ teaching centers the margins of the society, to bring those who would follow the master to care for vulnerable children first, without being centered on their own selves.

Jesus' constant concern for the poor, the vulnerable, and those in need of care in the community remind us that becoming humble is not the easiest task for us. Just like being a parent is a great responsibility, it's also not easy to constantly be the one to care for those in need. Jesus calls his followers not just to care for others, but to prevent them from falling into sin - to remove stubbing blocks - anything that would get in the way of others living a life centered in Christ. One of the problems with our human nature is that we get easily overwhelmed with the needs all around us, at every stop light and parking lot, we meet neighbors in need. We choose to look away at times. We walk the long way around. We act like we don't notice. Caring for others is no easy task and there's always more to do.

It's a good thing we don't do it alone.

Look around this place. These people seated in the pews next to you, behind you, in front of you - they are the body of Christ that makes up Reformation Lutheran Church. Look at all these partners in ministry we have here. Yes! We have the gift of community, and as people called through the Word to follow Jesus, we lean on each other to do the work of caring for the poor, the isolated, the grieving, the sick, and for each other.

Because the truth we hear tonight is this: *none of us* are the greatest.

We are mortal creatures. On our own, we are not holy, righteous, or or special. We are part of a creation that is crumbling, decaying, and dying. So often we consume more than we create, we take more than we give, and we hurt more than we help. Life is short. We know and have experienced the consequences of our sin. We are dust.

This dust we will receive on our foreheads in just a few minutes is a reminder of our mortality - a powerful symbol that can serve to focus our hearts and actions as we enter the season of Lent, on the things we do and don't do, but most of all our need for a savior. These ashen marks are messy and dirty, but they are intentionally shaped into a cross. It's for a reason. Through the cross of Christ, we are welcomed, dusty as we are, into newness of life, granted forgiveness, gifted grace and mercy, and welcomed into the Kingdom of heaven. We who start as dust and finish our earthly existence as the same, are named holy and righteous in Christ Jesus.

One of my favorite faith songs is by Lisa and Michael Gungor, called "Beautiful Things." Maybe you've heard it here before. For me, it names the reality of pain in this life, the reality of the consequences of our sin and selfishness, and the longing to know where we belong in the world, in relationship with God, and with one another. In Jesus, God with us is always making us new - making beautiful things out of dust.

[song: "Beautiful Things"]

As a community we are made up of individuals who are flawed, failing, and forgetful. We are also found, faithful, & forgiven. We are dust, and the earth is made of the same stuff. All of it together amounts to a lot, and with dust, God, who is the greatest, is doing amazing things.