

Romans 13:8-14 ~ Matthew 18:15-20

*Glimpses of Heaven on Earth: Putting on Christ (1<sup>st</sup> of 6)*

Rally Day ~ Bible Presentation ~ Sunday School Teacher Dedication ~ 15<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

September 10, 2023

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*Introduction to Gospel Lesson, Discovery Time & Bible Presentation*

Who is the greatest? Who is the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time)? With the US Open Tennis Tournament finals today; and our Green Bay Packers set to kick off their first game of the 2023 NFL Season this afternoon, with high hopes for the beginning of quarterback Jordan Love's new era; and with our Milwaukee Brewers holding their berth precariously, at the top of their division over the Cubs by 4 games: Greatness in our sports heroes, is in the air!

When the disciples asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1) He responds with a series of surprising and counterintuitive lessons about greatness in God's eyes, winding up with today's second scripture lesson. But do you know what Jesus did *first*? The anonymous writer of Matthew tells us: "He called a child to come forward and sit among them." So following Jesus' lead, I am now going to invite all the children to come forward to the chancel steps for Discovery Time and Carmen Lawler to assist with what comes next for us today...

Before we present Everett Tucker with his new NRSV Spark Bible, I will ask Carmen to read from his Bible what Jesus said, right *after* he placed the child among them. As she reads these verses, feast your eyes on the faces of the children God has placed among us this day. Here it is: *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.* (Matt. 18:3-5)

This is one small piece of wisdom you will not hear or see much in our celebrity-crazed, super hero-worshipping culture. It is just one example of Jesus' teaching that we urgently need to share with the next generation. We have been given this deep narrative from the generations before us. You learned it from someone, somewhere, somehow. Who was that person or church community for you? Take a breath and offer a silent prayer of gratitude for whomever just popped into your mind when I asked that question.

Today, we are giving Everett Tucker who is now in third grade, 66 books that together tell the story of God's unfailing love. Well, it may look like one book... [To which one of the children remarked loudly, "but it is one book!"] Let us pray: *Loving God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. May this new Bible we have just given to Everett illuminate your Love for him and for all creation. May this Bible he is holding become for him a touchstone of your love and power in our lives today and always. Amen.* [Children & Teachers leave for Sunday School.]

When I look at you, my heart smiles. When I hear stories of what has happened here while I was away on my three-month sabbatical, I see glimpses of heaven on earth. Yes, right

here at 200 S. Lincoln. Even where our road has literally become torn up earth. Surely the Lord did answer our prayer, "may the Lord watch between me and thee while we were absent from one another." More than watch, the Lord germinated new seeds of ministries imagined, created, and begun, while we were apart. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of our "new" church building on Oct. 1 is happening. "Open Church" quiet hour of meditation and prayer started in August, Solar Team is gaining momentum, and right here before our very eyes: brand new Convergence paraments. I was also delighted to learn that worship attendance throughout the summer was higher, not lower, than usual. Maybe I should take every summer off...

I want to thank you, thank God working through you, in more ways than I could name or know. This was the hope that while I was catching my breath, getting renewed and strengthened. That while I was given this opportunity to step away from doing ministry here, God would be at work in and among you all. And indeed, this hope this prayer has been answered in ways we are still discovering. Next Sunday, Sept. 17, I will present a Forum for All to share highlights of my sabbatical travels, learnings, and project, in the Parlor following worship.

Although our children have left for Sunday School and are no longer providing a visual object lesson for us, keep picturing them here, as I read verses 10-14, to set the context for today's gospel lesson that begins at v. 15. You will notice that It sounds as if the child is still standing there as Jesus proceeds to take on a subject most of us would rather avoid or ignore... conflict.

### *Sermon*

When I told a friend the story of how I really broke my wrist, she said I had to come up with a better story. The real story, some of you have already heard, was the classic boat to dock transfer gone wrong scenario. The boat and the lake won. Rather than staying on the dock and safely walking to our cabin after enjoying a Friday Fish fry dinner out with Bob, I managed to crack my wrist smacking it against the metal rim of the boat as I fell into the lake. This happened just four days before I was to return to work, from my three-month magical sabbatical. My friend who said I should come up with a better story had two suggestions: I broke it in a boxing match (if I was preaching on Jacob wrestling with the angel, I might have gone with that one) *or* I could say I landed on it skydiving. The sky diving one works better with today's text.

Stay with me and you will see the connection between skydiving and both of today's scripture lessons. Hopefully. Believe it or not, skydiving is an extreme sport that appeals to me. I have fantasized about giving it a try. Apparently, I am not the only one drawn to extreme sports. Approximately 4 million people participate in extreme sports every year. Any base jumpers out there? Motocross bicyclers? Snowboarders? Free solo rock climbers? Here in Wisconsin, we might have some Creekers. Ever heard of that one? It's a sport where you throw yourself into whitewater and waterfalls from your kayak or raft.

Although most of these popular extreme sports are individual sports, the one to which I hear Jesus calling us; the one about which Paul is explaining the rules of the game, is an extreme team sport. It's called "Team Restoration." And we are all on it. The object of this sport is to

restore everyone and all creation, no matter how deep or multiple the fractures may be. Paul sums up the rules of the game succinctly for us in Romans 13:10 "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Jesus offers a sample play by play for restoring, regaining broken relationships within a faith community. You want to be the Greatest of All Time in the kingdom of heaven on earth? Jesus says then do this: Welcome the child, gather the lost, restore the broken. It's *not* about winning the argument. It's not even about being right. It's about restoring a relationship in which all parties are respected and honored.

So "Team Restoration" listen up: The work of unifying love is the one charism, the one spiritual gift to which we are all called. And let's be honest: facing the conflicts that divide us, trusting the slow work of regaining trust, of restoring relationships that have been broken. Whether it was just one argument last night after dinner, or broken promises by one people against another for centuries: this is perhaps the *least popular* extreme sport there is. Yet, this is the one Jesus keeps calling us to get off the bench and get in the game. He is not teaching us to live by the more common and more popular "peace at any price" or "go along to get along" strategies. Honestly, "Team Restoration" is the least popular and the most extreme sport on this planet. It takes courage and faith. Throwing ourselves into the whitewater of broken promises, seeking restoration and healing is scary, risky. And we are not issued crash helmets or shoulder pads. But unlike football, we already know that Jesus wins. Love wins. Ultimately. How do we know that? Because the tomb was empty. Jesus is *not* here; the angel told the women at the tomb. The tomb is still empty.

Where is Jesus? He gave us the answer in verse 20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Today we get to hear this "pastor's go to verse" in context. We church leaders like to quote this one this to affirm whoever did show up when we have a smaller than expected turnout for an event. I believe it to be true. We open each of our home communion services with this text. Knowing Jesus is present with us is primarily a source of profound comfort and peace. However, today we hear it in a different light. Today we also hear edgy Jesus, promising us that Coach Jesus is watching us as we argue. Jesus is with us as we take a leap of faith and courageously choose restoration. And he is there noticing what we say or "like" or repost on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram or on X. There are plenty of other teams tempting us: like Team Snark, Team Grudge, Team Revenge. More on the practice of forgiving next Sunday. For now, remember that whenever we choose restorative words or actions (however small or uncertain), we glimpse heaven on earth.

So, "Who are you wearing?" Apparently, that's the question celebrities are asked when they arrive at a red-carpet event. That's right. It's not "what are you wearing" but "who" – what designer are you sporting tonight? As Paul tells us, we all have in our wardrobe one outfit, the that is just right for us. An eternal divine gift. Yes: will we put on Christ – the designer of all creation? Suit up with the disarming "armor of Light." As you leave your house, or open up your phone, or start to speak, take a moment to check your spiritual mirror, did you put on Christ today? Or did you forget your disarming armor of light? Take a breath, a short walk, and you can suit up anywhere, anytime.

Friends, Jesus is here with us. That is good news. Let's put on Christ for Christ's sake and for our children's. Let's be honest, our time on this earth is short. Our impact is limited to the gift of time and energy on this planet that God gives to us. The fruit of our work will not be completed in our lifetime. We give Bibles to our children to pass on our faith to the next generation. Team Restoration: the best gifts we can give are the gifts of courage, of hope and restoration to our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. To all of the next generations. Coach Christ is cheering us on. To God be the glory.