

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, as we enter your house, we do so with ears that struggle to hear the word of the Christ today. We hear the calling of Christ in the Gospel as dissonant to our ears. We were born, we were raised, we live in a culture that lauds the mentality of “might makes right,” and we have bought into that mentality at levels we don’t realize. We hear a message from Christ that tells us differently, that real power in the Kingdom is that of being servant of others with a child’s attitude of wonder. We are taught to be “grown up,” but that becomes childishness when we push down the wonder and humility of childlike. With the way the world works, it can be hard to live this out, but God, because it is your way, we know it is powerful and worthwhile. Help us to seize this calling of humility and wonder in a world that prefers self-righteousness and power. Hear our prayer, O God.

We lift up the prayers we have raised in your house today, those spoken and unspoken, those known and unknown to our ears. We lift up the prayers of our brothers and sisters around the world. We lift up those who struggle for the basics of safety, shelter, and nourishment. We pray for those who struggle to find good health, whether it be bodily, mentally, and within their spirits. We pray for the toils and pains of this world we do not know or understand, and entrust it all into your care. Direct us where we must go with the power of your Holy Spirit, as we seek to be the hands and feet of the Body of Christ. We lift up all these things in Christ’s Blessed Name, praying in one voice across time and space...

## SERMON

A while back, and I’m sure you might remember, there was a feature called “Kids say the Darndest Things” on the show Art Linkletter’s House Party. It made a reappearance in the late 1990s, but the premise was simple: children can say some pretty crazy and, well,

awesome things as they try to make sense of the world around them. It may not always be factual, but there is a rough sense of wisdom from the mouths of babes. The show wanted it to be “cute.” Other times, there is stuff that you may not want your kids saying but...it’s funny. I was just reading a few of these the other day online. One day, a little girl asked her grandfather, “How old are you, granddad?” “59,” he responded. “Next year, you’ll be 60 then?” she asked. “Yes,” he said. Then she said, “And after that, you’ll be dead.” Another little boy was playing football with his dad. The dad threw the ball to the boy, and the ball flew right over the boy’s head. The dad said, “I’m sorry, son, that was a horrible throw.” The little boy yelled back, “No, dad, that was a great throw.” As he’s walked toward the ball, he stopped, turned around, and asked his dad, “When we say something nice, and don’t mean it at all, that’s called being polite, right?” When you think about it, we wouldn’t necessarily say these things aloud, but we can’t deny that they aren’t exactly wrong either...

Children are often scolded for the very honest things they say, but their honesty and their wonder we lose in the everyday humdrum of our lives. In fact, it’s refreshing whenever we see it, and we laugh...because it’s true. But we can’t do it, we’re taught. We are taught to push down wonderment and just do what we have to to get by. We lose a part of ourselves when we do that, and we lose perspective. Jesus Christ calls us back to it when we tells us what true greatness is. It is found in the form of a servant and in a child, when we look at the world not seeking how we can be right but how we can experience wonder and humility. Let’s turn back the clock to remember childlike wisdom as we look at the scripture for today, see how we have adopted the “might makes right” mentality rarely appropriate as we follow Christ, and cure it with the prescription of Christ.

So, our scripture begins with the disciples destined for failure. They were locked in a debate about who is the greatest disciple among themselves. Let me pause. First of all, how are you going to measure it? "I caught more fish than you." "I love more people than you do." "Jesus loves me more." I mean, seriously, no matter how you imagine the conversation went down, they sound like children in a petty, childish debate. But then Jesus hears of the whole commotion and answers them all with the answer they desire, even though it may not be the answer they want. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Well, that just doesn't make sense, now does it? How can you be first if you are the one who serves the rest?

This is, by far, no way to sum up the culture throughout history. The Romans didn't try to be anyone's servant as they conquered the world. It's always one form or another of a cliché: "Might makes right." The strongest wins. In the movie *Talladega Nights*, Ricky Bobby lives by the mentality he received from his father: "If you aren't first, you're last." That's the way we are taught by the world to live life.

Then...there's sports. It's the way we find out who is the best in sports. You know that every week from now until the Super Bowl, Jeff Hildreth and I will be going back and forth about which of our teams is better. I am a follower of the Great Chicago Bears; he loves that low grade team from Wisconsin. Now, I know honestly that my Bears are in a rebuilding year. We'd be so lucky to make the playoffs, or just to have a winning record. But that doesn't mean I want to give him the benefit of being right about his team. And, I confess, we lost to the Packers last week in what was a well-fought game, wouldn't you agree, Jeff? But let's face it, we will never agree on it; we will always be, well, fighting about who is better throughout all history. I mean, I have 1985 and NFL founder George "Papa

Bear” Halas and the best team of history to look back on and he has the second best NFL coach in history. Did you know that the Halas loaned money to the Packers in the early days to keep them afloat? The Packers owe their existence to the Chicago Bears. In other words, I win.

You get the picture, right? But this is a different realm; this isn’t what Jesus was talking about. This competition is fine in sports; this is how we argue and prove who is right...which is usually me. It’s not fun and it’s not worthwhile without the fight of who is better, who is greater, who is the greatest. But we can take it too far. When we take it off the field, the discussion loses meaning. It becomes, well, childish in arguing about who is better. We bring one another down; we make ourselves more important. What’s the point? Who really wins? It’s all about power that brings other people down in the real game, the game of life, and when the story becomes about power, then everyone loses in the end.

It’s fine on the field, but, let’s be honest, winning isn’t everything off the field. According to Jesus, the greatest must be servant of all, also like those who welcome the child. The example of Jesus is intentional when Jesus picks up a child. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” When you want to welcome a messenger from God, who do you send for? A pastor? A priest? Someone with authority and wisdom? Do you welcome a political leader? The last one...I certainly hope not. Jesus is saying, when you want to welcome a messenger from God, find a child.

Why a child? Think about children. They can teach the mentality of a true servant. According to the podcast Sermon Brainwave, in the mentality of the day, children are not exactly the most important people to welcome. They are third or fourth class; they I mean,

think about it. We don't welcome children in the same way we welcome an honored guest. We don't go to children for advice. We don't go to children for wisdom, but that is where Christ invites us to go. Just a few verses later, Jesus tells us that we must take on the Kingdom as a child, and the same mentality is here. This is where greatness is found, true, honest-to-God greatness because it is the humble wisdom of a child that reconnects us to something important. It connects us with the honest part of ourselves, the loving servanthood, we have been taught to keep down, keep silent for social mores and what is "respectable."

And, I think, that's the problem. When we think about it, the most childish of all people are adults. Let's face it, when we don't get what we want, we have a tendency to get cranky. We argue, we stamp around, we try to sound so important to ourselves and others. Or, we passive aggressively attack one another or gossip. These are not mature behaviors; these are, by definition, childish. We don't get to the bottom of the problem. We complain about it without solving anything. This is self-righteousness. On the other hand, Jesus is lifting another ideal. We aren't supposed to be childish. That is what the disciples were. Their entire debate was, "it's all about me," and Jesus' answer is exactly the opposite. Children want to love and serve others. Jesus' ideal is being childlike.

And that is our calling today. True greatness is found in the selfless servanthood and wisdom of childlike wonder. Now, let's set aside all assumptions; to be childlike is to see the world around with wonder and selflessness. It's honest in a world that fears honesty and the strength it takes to be honest with one another and one's self. I read the story online of a little child who, whenever her mother told her, "I love you," she'd respond with "I love me too." Our ears hear that as selfish. This is not selfishness; this is childlike

goodness and a lesson to us all. We often don't love ourselves enough; we stray from this kind of honest loving so that we find ourselves insecure. So we have to go out of our way to solicit the love of other people to make up for that hole, all because we put on this fake façade of strength and superiority. That is what prompts the dispute among the disciples; we want others to see our greatness, so we flourish words and self-importance to show others what we ourselves want to see. We are an insecure people, and so we pretend to be strong when we're really not. "Might makes right" is the world's way making ourselves strong. Jesus says that's not the point or strength by the Kingdom of God's measure. Today's world is too busy being right, too busy wanting others to think they're great, too busy trying to prove it, to discover what true strength is. Time to turn the tables on the world.

So, play with LEGOs. Play in the dirt and recognize the beauty of the world God made. Tell funny jokes, and be honest with one another. Don't be weighed down by all these things you can't control and just...be. Be the child we are taught to leave behind, and welcome lovingly those who see the world in that way. This faith is not dour and grave. It's serious, but seriousness is not without joy and wonder. Ya know what? Who cares who's the best? In the final analysis, it doesn't matter! What matters is how we live now, and we need to do it faithfully. Today, that means seeing the world in a childlike fashion, leaving debates of who is better and that kind of junk behind. That's just being childish.

Today, we redefine strength for all time. It's no longer...in fact, it never really was "might makes right." It works on the football field or any sport, but we do not live on a football field. The best players do not necessarily make greatness off the football field with those skills. The biggest weapons or bench press do not prove who is right. This is

childishness. These are fake measurements of the Kingdom of God, living right here and right now. Time to choose where we buy in. Jesus says the greatest is the most humble, the most servant-like, and that is seen in the ways of the child. This is childlike wisdom.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” says the Christ. Forget what the world says; the Christ has laid down the gauntlet. How will you respond? Are you big enough, are you strong enough, are you wise enough to be childlike? Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.