

"At that time, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" Most of the time when they ask this question, the deeper question they have in mind is, "Am I the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" But I don't think that's the question at work here. I think the deeper question they have in mind is this: "Who is the most important? Who is the greatest, so that I know who to pay attention to? So that I know who I have to make happy, who I need to please in order to get along further in the kingdom of heaven?" And when you ask it that way, trying to figure out who you're supposed to focus on or who you're supposed to pay attention to the most, it always brings with it that other little extra: "Who do I not have to pay attention to? Who do I not have to care about all that much?" But Jesus today turns that question around, doesn't he? He says, if you want to know who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, it's the very least, the very lowest in the kingdom. The kind of people that you would overlook entirely. God cares about those people. God cares about his little ones. And the question we have to ask ourselves today is, do we care about them in the same way that God cares about them?

Because Jesus, to prove his point, brings a child into the midst of them. Now, we don't want to misunderstand what he's doing. Because in these days, I think we tend to have a very high view of children. We tend to think of them as being somehow innocent and pure and without any kind of troubles. But if you think that a child can't be vicious, if you think that a child can't be selfish, if you think that a child can't do all kinds of sins, I don't think you've spent very much time with children. Children, like adults, are sinners. They need to be saved. They need Jesus. And that's the reason why we baptize children, because they need to be renewed and given a new life just as much as any adult. So Jesus' point here is not to say that they are somehow better than adults. Jesus' point here is to say they are like the very lowest in society. These are the little ones of the world, the kind of people that most people overlook. And that's true even for us, too. We don't usually think very much about children. After all, who among us would go to a child for financial advice? Who among us would go to a child and have them as a co-signer for our loan? Who among us would seriously argue that a child should have the right to vote? That's not a bad thing. We have good reasons for doing that. But it just goes to show you that children are part of the lower parts of society, the part of society that most people in the world are not going to go to first when they're thinking of the great ones that they want to emulate, the great ones that they want to imitate. They look to presidents. They look to kings. They look to bosses. The kind of people who are something in the world, just not children. And so Jesus sets this child among them and says, "If you want to be great in the kingdom, you need to become like this child. Someone that the world overlooks. Someone that the world doesn't go to for greatness. Truly I say to you," Jesus says, "unless you turn and become like children, unless you lower yourself, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." So God's little ones, then, are the ones that the world tends to overlook. God's little ones are the ones that we also might be tempted to overlook.

So we have to ask the question, then. What does God mean by his little ones? The little ones are the ones who are around us in everything. They are literally the children that we meet in Sunday School. They are our neighbors who go with us to church. They are the ones, the shut-ins who aren't able to come to church anymore. And they are also our family. In other words, as Jesus says a little bit later in Matthew chapter 18, God's little ones are our brothers in the faith, the ones who believe in Jesus with us. The ones who are part of God's family. We're all in this

together. We are all brothers and sisters in God, and Jesus cares for each and every member of his family. Do we do the same?

How much does God care? That's what Jesus goes on to say here, in verse five. He says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." Which is to say, God dwells within his own. He lives within the believer. That's how much he cares about us. He makes his home with us, so that whenever we do something for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, we do it also for God. After all, that's what Jesus says in Matthew chapter 25 at the great judgment at the end of the world. The king will say to those who are on his right, "Come into the kingdom, because you took care of me when I needed your help. You clothed me when I was naked. You fed me when I was hungry. And you visited me when I was in prison." And the faithful will say, "When did we do any of that, Lord?" Jesus says, "When you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it also for me." To serve one another, to care for one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ, is to receive God and to do all of these things also for him.

But Jesus also gives us a warning here. He goes on in verse six: "But 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 depths of the sea." That's a hard word. One we probably don't like hearing. But it is a word we should take seriously. Because God cares about his little ones so much, Christians, that anything that causes them to sin, anything that causes them to stumble, makes him angry. He wants to take care of this problem in the life to come. In fact, he says, it would be better for you, if you cause one of your brothers in Christ to sin, to have a great millstone hung around your neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. That would be a better fate than for those who cause one another to stumble. A hard word, but it shows God's care and concern for his little ones. He doesn't want anything to hurt them. He doesn't want anything to cause them to go away from him. And so we would do well to listen when God speaks this word to us today.

In fact, he expands on this. He says, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! If your hand causes you to sin. . . ." If you sin with this hand and that sin causes your brother to sin so they stumble and fall, it would be better for you to suffer the worst judgment in this life than for what God has prepared for those who cause others to sin. So Jesus says it's better, then, to deny yourself. Deny yourself so fully that you would literally cut off that hand that causes you to sin rather than make your brother stumble. If your hand causes you to sin, and that sin would make your brother fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away. Better to enter into life with one hand than with two hands to be thrown into hell. And if your foot causes you to sin, and your brother falls into sin because of it, better to cut it off and throw it away and enter into life with one foot than with two feet to be thrown into hell. This is serious business. Self-denial is something that we don't do just for ourselves. I think we often think of it that way. Taking up the cross is only for my own benefit. What Jesus tells us here is that denying yourself is actually more for your neighbor, the one who needs you to deny yourself so that they don't fall into sin. That's a hard thing, a hard thing to do for us, but it is this way of the cross that Jesus calls us to.

There's one more way that God describes how much he cares for his little ones, in verses 10 and 11. "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. For the Son of Man came to save the lost."

God cares about his little ones so much, Christians, that he sends the angels to be their guardians and protectors. And I think that's an important thing to talk about on this day when we observe St. Michael and all Angels. In fact, we should know exactly who these angels are, so that we can see just how much this means for God's care for his people.

Because the Angels are not these cute little cuddly creatures that we sometimes picture them as. And they are certainly not these women with long flowing hair and wings that we sometimes decorate our homes with. The angels are terrifying creatures. They are not the kind of creatures you'd want to encounter. After all, think of Isaiah chapter 6 where we meet the seraphim, the seraphim who are some of the angels surrounding the throne of God. The seraphim literally means the burning ones, the ones who are on fire. Not the kind of cuddly creatures we might expect. And the seraphim have six wings: two to cover their face and two to cover their feet and two to fly. And they are the ones who constantly sing out, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty!" We meet also the cherubim in Ezekiel and the book of Revelation, who are described as having four faces, one of an eagle, one of a lion, one of a man, and one of an ox, covered with eyes all over their bodies, with two wings, sitting on the four corners of God's throne. Not the kind of creatures that we'd want to depict, would we? And the angels are also the ones who carry out the judgments of God. It was an angel, for example, that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. It was an angel, for example, that killed 185,000 Assyrians who were besieging Jerusalem. They are dangerous, powerful soldiers of Christ. That's why we call the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the Lord of armies, the one who commands these heavenly legions, and the one who sends them out to carry out his will. In Revelation, we met Michael waging war against the devil.

But these dangerous, powerful creatures, Christians, are the creatures that God sends to watch after his little ones. They surround his little ones at all times, guarding them against every assault and attack of the devil. It'd be like if the President sent the Army to surround your house or gave you part of the Secret Service to guard you at all times. These powerful, mighty creatures who behold the face of God at all times are the ones that God sends to watch over those that he cares for. God cares so much for his Christians that he guards them with his own angels.

So do we, Christians, care about one another the same way? Do we forgive one another as we have been forgiven? Do we watch after one another so that we do not fall into sin? Do we try to not sin so that someone else falls into sin? Because God cares about each and every one of us, and he calls us to care in the same way about each other. We should love one another as God has first loved us.

The thing to remember today, Christians, is this. You are God's little ones. God loves you. God is going to take care of you. God is so concerned with your salvation that he watches over you at all times, even sending his holy angels to guard you in all of your ways. God denied himself in his Son, Jesus Christ, so that you would be saved. Because Jesus gave up everything, even his own life, so that you would be delivered from sin and become part of God's family to live with him forever. That's how much God cares about you. And so God calls us to love one another as we have [been] loved, to care for one another as he has cared for you. And in all of these things, Christians, God will watch over you. So let us forgive one another. Let us care for one another. Let us not cause each other to stumble. But let us walk with God who watches over us always.

To Christ be all glory, now and forever. Amen.