MATTHEW 18-19

18: 1-14, 19: 13-15 – True Greatness and the Little Ones

Greatness in the world and the kingdom of heaven are completely opposite. In the world greatness is about strength and power, achievement and success, popularity and credentials everyone recognizes. But think about the people we know who are "great" according to this definition. They are arrogant, self-absorbed, easily dismissive or judgmental of those who don't measure up. They can delude themselves about their own ability to acquire what they have with their own hard-won resources. We cannot trust them to be there for us without calculating what we may or may not deserve according to their criteria.

In the kingdom of heaven, however, true greatness is found among those who are most attentive to the weakest, those who have least in terms of status or success or accomplishment. Humility is not about being passive, allowing oneself to be walked all over. Rather, it is the strength and confidence of accepting one's humanity, and that one is dependent on others and therefore appreciative of others. Gratitude breeds attentiveness to others and a recognition that we support others not according to what they have earned or deserve, but because we ourselves have received in a way that is not calculated.

God toward us is full of abundant grace, generosity of forgiveness and blessing. We ourselves as children of the kingdom are then inspired to live toward others the same way. Thus, the test is this: how do we treat the weakest and most vulnerable? Children represent that, as does the one lost sheep.

Conversely, those who mistreat those who are vulnerable and weak, like children, are mostly to be condemned. Privilege, strength and power are not a ticket to use and abuse those who cannot resist our advances. Matthew's Jesus is quite condemnatory of the predatory practices of the rich, powerful and falsely righteous.

18: 15-35 – Tough Love

Where must we forgive and where must we take a stand? Jesus is not teaching that we must find a balance. No. if it's forgiveness we have to offer, we must offer it without limit. If it is a stand we must make, we must do so without limit in the sense that everyone may oppose us for it. The question is to discern the right path.

First, Jesus talks about taking a stand. In any community, there has to be a limit to what one person can do to another. If we love both people, then we have to protect one and restrain

another. If a member of a community refuses to stop abusing others or breaks trust with the community again and again, and if after repeated attempts to repair the breakage the offender refuses the terms necessary for reconciliation, Jesus' message is clear: cut the person off from the community. This is not about being hard and unforgiving. It is, rather, the requirement of intimacy and trust of a community where God is in the midst. People need to open up and share their vulnerabilities, feel safe and secure in love and acceptance. To abuse such vulnerable trust is to be a predator. That cannot be tolerated without destroying the community and destroying people in the process.

Second, there is forgiveness. If and when a person is remorseful, forgiveness must always be an option. Even if and when we have to set conditions, even if and when we have to give it time, even if and when we must regain trust…. forgiveness must always be an option. The hypocrisy of the servant in the parable must not be missed. He is forgiven a huge debt. Before God we are always debtors, always part of committing wrong, even in our best actions with our best intentions. Our experience of forgiveness before God, when genuinely felt and embraced, must be connected with our attitude to those around us, whose sins against us are smaller in proportion. We must extend forgiveness even if we have to confess to God that we cannot do so with purity of heart. That is part of our ongoing experience of forgiveness from God. God will forgive our lack of forgiveness if and when we repent of it.

19: 1-12 – Marriage and Divorce

There are ideals, and then there is real life. Jesus says that there is an ideal when it comes to marriage, but then there is real life when it comes to marriage. For Jesus, the issue is not simply divorce. The bigger issue is equality between men and women in his world. Part of the scandalous nature of Jesus' teaching and associations is how he treats women and how he includes them among his group of followers as friends and equals. Divorce is something to be contested by Jesus because it's all about men having the right, quite easily, to divorce their wives and leave them destitute as a result. Clearly, someone who is so vulnerable is going to be compliant and even slavish in a marriage out of desperation and fear. Jesus condemns divorce because he wants the men who have the right to do it, to be committed to their wives. A wife who does not have to fear divorce can make greater demands and have greater expectations in the marriage. This changes the whole institution of marriage. It becomes more what the ideal is: two people becoming one flesh. It is not about one person (a man) having all the rights and privileges to get what he wants, and if he does not get it, to threaten and carry out the threat of cutting off his wife and trying again with another.

Adultery is about breaking trust. Just like in a faith community where intimacy is shared (where two or three are gathered) so in a marriage, without trust, intimacy and sharing of vulnerability in love is not possible. So, Jesus allows for divorce in such cases even if it is not ideal.

Jesus also allows for singleness. In fact, he claims that for some it can be a gift, and certainly this was the path for himself and for others among his group of followers.

19: 16-30 – True Riches

What do we value most? What preoccupies our time, our energy, our concern, our disposable income? Jesus meets a young man who is a good man, someone who fulfills the commandments. But he wants more out of life, something his riches, status and achievements cannot give him. In his world, there are many people around him who need what he has. Jesus tells him that if he wants to take that extra step, if he wants more, than let him give up his riches, live like everyone else and follow Jesus for true riches of spirit. He cannot do this. His whole life is so tied to his riches that he would rather live in need of something than give up his attachment to riches in order to gain what he needs most.

The disciples are troubled by this. Even though they have no riches, they recognize that all people, themselves included, want riches. They envy that young man. But Jesus uses this experience to teach them about true riches. Anything they have had to "give up" for the kingdom will be converted into the kind of riches of spirit that have eternal payback. Investing in the Kingdom is far more important and can provide a far greater return than any investment in worldly riches, honour, glory and status.

Even though many people may realize this to an extent, most everyone is like that young man. How can we become free of so many of things to which we are attached, things that seem to define who we are? Especially is this the case for the young, who have life ahead of them, who crave status, popularity and the means to live materialistically in the world. Jesus' message is as counter-cultural today as it was then.