

Matthew 18:1-4

Just a few weeks ago the eyes of the world were on Usain Bolt of Jamaica. The world's fastest man, he set records in both the 100 and 200 meter dashes. He was so far ahead of every other Olympic sprinter that he coasted the last few meters of the 100, and he could have coasted in on the 200. Usain bolt is a hero in his country. He is admired by all Jamaicans.

This morning, however, I want to draw your attention to a different Olympic race. Held in Seattle, Washington a few years ago, it was the 100 meter dash in the Special Olympics. Nine contestants, all of them physically or mentally challenged, were on their marks at the starting line. At the gun they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with the desire to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except for one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a few times, and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy crying. They slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back...every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed the crying boy. "This will make it better," she said. Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Every single person in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for ten minutes.

Now if you want to learn how to run fast, then watch Usain Bolt. But if you want to learn how to "run" with others in life, then we need to pay attention to these children. Jesus' disciples were big fans of Usain Bolt. "Which one of (us) is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" they asked. They all wanted to be first. Not one of them wanted to be second, third, or last in line. But Jesus doesn't care about the "Usain Bolts" of this world. He stood a child in the midst of them—a little child, and said, "To be the greatest, you must become like children."

We have children in our midst this morning. We often tell them to "grow up!" But today Jesus tells us to "grow down;" to become like a little child. It's not that children are less sinful than adults. It's not that they are somehow more innocent; more noble. And it's certainly not that children have all the answers to life's problems; that they are above the need for training.

Children, says Jesus, teach us to be humble. You put a toddler from a king's house with a toddler from the house of a beggar, and the two of them will play with each other just fine. The one will not think to himself, "Because I am the son of a king, I will not play with such a poor beggar." No pride; no haughty attitude is present. He doesn't care if his playmate is rich or poor, black or white, handicapped or not...he'll play with him. Later on, sinful pride may grow in his heart. But when they're little, children teach us to be humble.

We need that lesson here in Augusta. We, like the disciples, want to "Bolt" ahead of others and be seen as great people. When working for the church, we want others to know how hard we have worked. When giving our time and money, we want others to know how much we have sacrificed. We like praise. We thrive on recognition. And, too often, we serve Jesus and His church not because of His love for us, but because of our love for glory and honor.

And that's shameful. That's not faith; that's sin. Faith does not reach for glory. It does not strive for greatness. Faith reaches for Christ. It does not grab, it only receives. If we're striving to be great in God's Kingdom, then it's not faith showing itself—it's sinful pride.

"Unless you turn," says Jesus, "And become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Those eight children in the race all turned and went back. They turned because there was something greater in them than the desire for greatness. They had love in their hearts. Love for a crying boy; love for each other. "Unless you turn," says Jesus. To turn is to repent. To repent of our sinful pride. To repent of our striving for greatness in God's Kingdom. And repentance is the work of God within us. It's His love at work in us. We cannot turn ourselves around. It's Jesus who turns us.

The cries of that boy turned those children around, and it is the cry of Jesus from His cross which turns us. "Father," Jesus cried in agony, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus turned God's anger away from you. He turned away God's punishment from you to Himself. "Don't punish them, Father," He cried, "Forgive them." And He did; and He does. Your Father in heaven is not angry at you. He became angry at Jesus in your place. He does not look upon your sinful pride; He forgives it. He does not punish you and me for striving for greatness; He forgives you. Through the mouth of His servant, your Savior cries the words: "I forgive you all of your sins." And with that cry He turns you around. God turns to you in love, and so He turns you away from the love of glory to His heart of compassion. In Holy Baptism God turns to you with mercy, and so He turns you to Himself to live as His dear child. At His Supper Jesus turns to you and gives you His heavenly gifts, and so He turns you to face others in His church not with pride, but with humility, with meekness and mercy.

And now we're getting at, most of all, how we must become like children. Children, little children, can only receive. They don't take care of their parents; their parents take care of them. Their mother gives birth to them. She nurtures them with milk. Their parents clothe them, change their diapers, love and care for them, protect and shelter them. Children are recipients of everything which their parents give them. That is the greatest thing that children can do—to be cared for by loving parents. There is no pride in a child whose diaper is being changed. There is no shame, no embarrassment. He looks into the eyes of his parent only with love—love that he is receiving from them.

"Unless you become like children," says Jesus, "You will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." We don't just learn humility from children...we must become as children. Saving faith, like a child, can only receive. And that is why your Heavenly Father brought you here this morning—to receive, as little children, His grace and mercy in Christ Jesus.

We may work in His church. We may give of our time and treasures in His Kingdom. Yet nothing that we do will ever gain for us forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation. These gifts cannot be earned. They can only be given by Jesus to those who, with child-like faith, receive them with thanksgiving. Children are born, nurtured, and cared for by their parents. And so in baptism Christ gave you birth, and with His Word and Supper He nurtures you and cares for you. Like those eight children who turned back to the crying boy, so you and I again and again, return to Him who was wounded for our offenses, and who cries out to us, through His pastors, His words of life and salvation.

Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? Usain Bolt may be the greatest sprinter. Michael Phelps may be the greatest swimmer. The greatest in God's Kingdom are those who, like little children, humbly come week after week to God's House not to impress others, but to hear Jesus' words, to eat and drink His body and blood, to receive His eternal gifts through Word and Sacrament. That's what little children do—they receive what they're given.

Will you do great things with what you're given? I don't know. That's God's work in you and through you. But greatest of all is not what you do, but that Jesus gives you as little children, His grace and mercy; and then leads you with all His forgiven children to the finish line of heaven. Amen.