

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)
September 19, 2021
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 11:18-20
Psalm 54
James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at www.trinitybend.org.

The football seasons – both college and pro – have just recently begun. Meanwhile, Major League Baseball is heading towards the post-season. And today is the last day of the WNBA regular season; the playoffs start this coming Thursday.

Whatever the sport, the players are competing to win. Their goal? Establish who is number one: the best, the fastest, the strongest, the sharpest. By whatever measure of whatever game, they vie to be the greatest.

And the fans are cheering them on! Don't get me wrong, I'm one of those fans. And I'll be glad to have a game – or games – to watch on TV this afternoon.

All the same, it's good to question the assumption that prowess on the field or the court is the measure of greatness. Today's gospel challenges just about every one of our cultural measures of the term. On this occasion, Jesus was (once more) teaching his disciples about what was to come. It wasn't victory. It wasn't dominating your opponent. Far from it.

And (yet again) they miss the point. One commentator says that they were "so dense that light bends around them." Instead of taking Jesus' teaching to heart, they argue with one another about what it means to be great and who is the greatest. They could not hear what Jesus said, what he was offering up for them to hear.

In that sense, it's nothing new. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had been announcing that the kingdom of God was drawing near. He was inviting those with "ears to hear" to pay attention to new possibilities, inviting those with "eyes to see" to discover a new way of living. He was challenging them to help him turn this upside down world right-side up again. And most folks had a hard time hearing him and seeing what he meant.

So, too, when Jesus talks about greatness. He upends conventional thinking. It isn't about winning, he says, it's about serving. And then, to drive the point home, Jesus enacts sort of a parable of the kingdom he announced. We likely miss the point because children didn't occupy the same place in society then as they do for us today. They were lower in the established pecking order of the day even than slaves. Literally AND figuratively, they brought nothing to the table. And so, even though their parents would have loved them, children had no rights, no influence, no value. They had no standing at all.

That's why it looks like a parable of the kingdom: Jesus takes a child with no standing in society and he literally "stands" that child in their midst. He's inviting anyone with "eyes to see" to imagine a new way of living together in this world.

We're never told whether the child is a boy or a girl. For my part, I'm imagining she was a girl. It makes the point even more.

Jesus is showing us that greatness should be measured by how much we pay attention to those with no standing in the world, those everyone else is all-too-happy to overlook and disregard. Greatness is all about how we share with others, how much we take care of others, how much we serve others. Especially those who most need us to care for them.

And even now, the world needs to be reminded to pay attention to children – and not just poor children in other parts of the world.

This past week, US Olympic gymnasts appeared before a Senate committee looking into why the FBI was so slow to take seriously allegations of sexual abuse against a former team doctor. "I blame Larry Nassar," Simone Biles said, "and I also blame an entire system that enabled and perpetrated his abuse."

I'm not sure who asked it, but this is the painful, heart-breaking question left hanging: "How much is a little girl worth?" What a heart-breaking question!

Imagine living in a world would where nobody had to ask that question, if boys and girls – especially girls – grew up never having to wonder how much they're worth? Imagine such a world. That's the kingdom of God.

And Jesus shows us how to enter in:

*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

With all of this in mind, let me share with you an old story. Whether it ever happened or not, it speaks a thrilling truth. It's the story of an elementary teacher, by the name of Mrs. Thompson, and one of her students, Theodora Stoddard, but everybody knew her as "Teddy." ⁱ

On the very first day of school, Mrs. Thompson told her 5th-grade class that she loved all her children all the same, but it was a lie. There in the front row, slumped in her seat, was Teddy. Mrs. Thompson had noticed Teddy the year before. She didn't play well with others. Her clothes were messy. And she could be unpleasant. Mrs. Thompson wasn't looking forward to teaching Teddy.

Teachers were required to review each child's past records, but Mrs. Thompson had put Teddy's off until last. When she finally got around to it, she felt ashamed.

Teddy's first grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. She does her work neatly and has good manners. She is a joy to be around."

Her second grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well-liked by her classmates. But her mother has a terminal illness. Life at home must be a struggle."

Her third grade teacher wrote, "Her mother's death has been hard on her. Teddy tries, but her father shows little interest. Her home life will soon affect her if some steps aren't taken."

Teddy's fourth grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. She doesn't have many friends and sometimes she sleeps in class."

Mrs. Thompson realized the problem now. And it broke her heart.

She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents, all beautifully wrapped. But Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper from a grocery bag. Some of the children started to laugh when Mrs. Thompson found a rhinestone bracelet with some stones missing and a bottle of perfume that was one quarter full. But she said it was very pretty and she put it on. Then she dabbed some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my Mom used to." After the children left, she cried for at least an hour.

On that very day, Mrs. Thompson quit teaching reading, writing and arithmetic; instead, she began to teach children. And she paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with her, her mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged her, the faster she responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had blossomed. And Teddy said Mrs. Thompson was the best teacher ever.

A year later, Mrs. Thompson found a note under her door, from Teddy, telling her that she was still the best teacher she ever had in her whole life.

Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. She then wrote that she had finished high school, third in her class, and she was still the best teacher she ever had in her whole life.

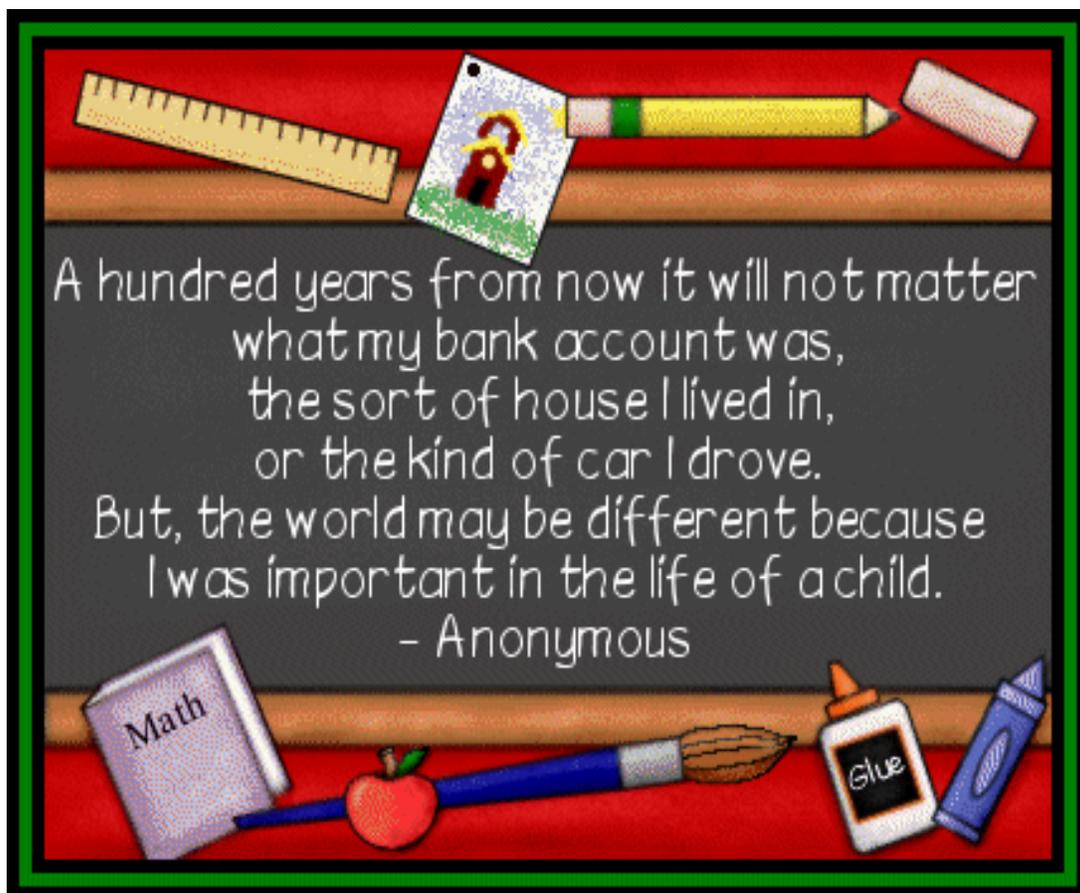
Four years after that, she got another letter, saying that while things had been tough at times, she stayed in school, had stuck with it, and would soon graduate from college with the highest of honors. She assured Mrs. Thompson that she was still the best and favorite teacher she ever had in her whole life.

Four more years passed and yet another letter came. Teddy had gone further, and the letter declared that Mrs. Thompson was still the best, and her favorite teacher ever. But now Teddy's name was a little longer. She signed it, Theodora F. Stoddard, M.D.

There was yet another letter that spring. Teddy said she'd met someone special was going to be married. And Teddy asked if Mrs. Thompson might agree to sit in the place at the wedding that was usually reserved for the mother of the bride. She did, of course. And she wore that bracelet — the one with several rhinestones missing — and she made sure she was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered her mother wearing.

They hugged each other, and *Doctor Stoddard* whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you, Mrs. Thompson, for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference." Mrs. Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back. She said, "Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

It, too, is a parable about greatness — not on the field or on a basketball court, but in the kingdom of God, where everyone has standing, where every boy and girl knows their worth, and everyone is treated as a precious child of God.



ⁱ She was "Theodore" in the original version of this old story. But I'm imagining and re-telling it today with Teddy as a girl.