

Gathered in His Name!

Psalm 23, Matthew 18:1-20

August 6, 2000

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” “It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” What wonderful good news this is!

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” Part of who we are and what we do as the church is to receive people here in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact, we especially receive the children here, into the household of faith, into the place of worship, into the family of the people of God. Think about what this means. Think about how different children are from adults. By definition, they cannot be in the adult choir. They do not preach. Many cannot yet read the words of the Bible or the Hymnal. They are here not because of what they can do, not because of what they can bring, not because of what they can contribute, and not because of what they can accomplish, but simply because they are. They bless us by their being here.

And so they remind us of our own status here. It is important for us to read and sing and preach and contribute. But finally, we are here not because of all the good things we can do, but because of all the good things God has already done for us and continues to do. We are here, not to give instructions to the Almighty on how to run the universe, and not to be equal partners with God. Instead, we are here as children. We are here as grateful and faithful children. We are here only because the grace of God calls us and gathers us here. So, the children among us remind us of who we all are. When the church forgets that, we forget who we are. We forget that we live by the grace of God alone, and we begin to think that we can live by our own wits and strength and goodness. But when we receive a child in the name of Christ, we learn again who we are—the children of God whom Christ has received—and so we are reminded of, and strengthened in, the grace of God.

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” This arises within the context of a discussion of greatness. Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem to be crucified and his disciples were already asking him about who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Obviously to us—with the advantage of two-thousand years of hindsight—they were missing the point. Then Jesus called a child and put among them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” To become *childlike* does not be to become *childish*. There are plenty of places in the scripture where it encourages us to grow up, to be mature, and to be thoughtful, responsible adults. This does not undermine or contradict that.

Instead, to become a child is to realize that we have a Father. We have a Father in heaven. We cannot enter the kingdom of God if we think it is our kingdom. We cannot be in the kingdom of God if we think it is run according to our will and standards. Instead, by definition, to enter the kingdom of God involves acknowledging that God is the king. To become a child of God involves realizing that God is our Father. That is part of why it is so important to receive children, who cannot be great and powerful in the church. We are reminded that we have all been received as children into the family of the people of God.

“It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” We have sometimes emphasized the importance of our response to God’s grace to the

extent that it makes it seem that salvation depends upon our will, our decision, and our determination. But if we could save ourselves that way, we would not need Jesus Christ. Our names were written in the book of life before the beginning of time. The grace of God comes before our response. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross is good and complete and perfect and does not need for us to add anything to it. And this prior, gracious will of God is that not one of these little ones should perish. What wonderful good news!

“It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” This comes in the middle of a teaching about not offending people. Do not put stumbling blocks in their way. Do not do things that drive people away from the church, the gospel, and the Christian faith. Do not despise people who may seem to you to be weak or little or on the fringe of things. In fact, if somebody is separated from the community, go and find them and bring them back, and there will be more rejoicing over the one than over the ninety-nine who are still here. The story is told to encourage the church to join the good shepherd in the search for those who are separated from the community. *This* is the context in which Jesus says, “It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

Being separated from the community is to perish. Being in the community means being found and saved. Salvation is not just a private relationship between the believer and Jesus. Salvation has to do with reconciliation to God and to each other. It has to do with the shared life of this community. The concern here is that the church seek out, find, and bring people here.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” When God gathers us here, we are not alone. This is not a club. This is not a volunteer organization. We are here because God has been working in our hearts and souls and minds and lives to bring us here together. And when we are here in his name, when we are gathered as the church, we have the assurance that Jesus Christ is here with us and among us. We do not stand before God alone. We could not do it. We dare to worship only because Christ prays for us. We do not face the world alone. We could not. We dare to witness and work only because Christ goes before us and does not abandon us.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Notice that this says, “there I *am*.” “There I *am*, already.” It does not say, “There I *will be*.” It is not future tense, but present. It is not a promise about something that will happen but a declaration of the way things are. Two people cannot get together and compel Christ to be with them. Instead, when two people gather in his name—that is the important qualifier here—when two people gather in his name, he is already there among them. In fact, he is the one who drew them together.

As an example of two or three gathered in prayer, finding and receiving the lost, I want to read a column from the *Christian Century* about something that happened in 1984:

“Bless You, Mrs. Degrafinried”

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God [Matt. 5:9].

It all started early Tuesday morning, February 21, when Louise Degrafinried’s husband, Nathan, got up from bed in Mason, Tennessee, to let out the cat. “Cat,” as they call him, stood at the edge of the porch, his hair bristled up on his arched back, and he hissed.

“What you see out there, Cat?” Nathan asked.

A big man stepped from around the corner of the house and pointed a shotgun at Nathan.

“Lord, Honey,” Louise heard her husband shout. “Open the door, he’s got a gun.”

Before she could open the door, the man with the gun had shoved Nathan inside, pushing him and Louise against the wall.

“Don’t make me kill you!” he shouted, thrusting the gun in their faces. The couple knew immediately that the intruder was one of the escaped inmates whom they had heard about on the radio. He was Riley Arzeneaux of Memphis, who, with four other inmates, had escaped from Fort Pillow State Prison the previous Saturday.

Louise Degrafinried, a 73-year-old grandmother, stood her ground. “Young man,” she said, “I am a Christian lady. I don’t believe in no violence. Put that gun down and you sit down. I don’t allow no violence here.”

The man relaxed his grip on the shotgun. He looked at her for a moment. Then he laid his gun on the couch.

“Lady,” he said quietly. “I’m so hungry. I haven’t had nothing to eat for three days.”

“Young man, you just sit down there and I’ll fix you breakfast. Nathan,” she said, “go get this young man some dry socks.”

With that, Louise went to work. She fixed him bacon, eggs, white bread toast, milk and coffee. Then she got out her best napkins, and set her kitchen table.

“When we sat down, I took that young man by the hand and said, ‘Young man, let’s give thanks that you came here and that you are safe.’ I said a prayer and then asked him if he would like to say something to the Lord. He didn’t say anything, so I said, ‘Just say, ‘Jesus wept.’” Then we all ate breakfast.”

(“Why did you tell him to say, ‘Jesus wept?’” I asked her later. “Because,” she said, “I figured that he didn’t have no church background, so I wanted to start him off simple; something short, you know.”)

“After breakfast, we sat there and I began to pray. I held his hand and kept patting him on the leg. He trembled all over. I said, ‘Young man, I love you and God loves you. God loves us all, every one of us, especially you. Jesus died for you because he loves you so much.’

“‘You sound just like my grandmother,’ he said. ‘She’s dead.’ Nathan said that he saw one tear fall down the boy’s cheek.

“About that time, we heard police cars coming down the road. ‘They gonna kill me when they get here,’ he said.

“‘No, young man, they aren’t going to hurt you. You done wrong, but God loves you.’ Then me and Nathan took him by the arms, helped him up, and took him out of the kitchen toward the door. ‘You let me do all the talking.’ I told him. The police got out of their cars. They had their guns out. I shouted to the, ‘Y’all put those guns away. I don’t allow no violence here. Put them away. This young

man wants to go back. Nathan,' I said, 'you bring the young man on out to the car.' Then they put the handcuffs on him and took him back to the prison."

That afternoon, two of the prisoners who had been separated from Arzeneaux earlier entered a suburban backyard where a couple were barbecuing. The husband went into his house and came out with a gun. The escapees shot and killed him and took his wife hostage. They released her the next day.

Was Mrs. Degrafinried frightened? "No," she said. "Nathan said he was scared, but not me. I knew God was with me, that God had sent that young man to me for a reason. I knew God would lead me in the right direction."

Nathan and Louise Degrafinried are lifelong members of Mount Sinai Primitive Baptist Church. There, no doubt, they often sang:

Are you able to remember,
When a thief lifts up his eyes,
That his pardoned soul is worthy
Of a place in paradise?
Lord, we are able.
Our spirits are thine.
Remold them, make us,
Like thee, divine.¹

So, we are to receive the children, the weak, and the poor, and forget about seeking greatness! So are we to go out, find people, and bring them here. And so are we to gather in his name. to pray together in and for God's will.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." "It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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¹William H. Willimon, "Bless You, Mrs. Degrafinried." *Christian Century*, March 14, 1984, pp. 269-270.