The Greatness of Vulnerability

Text: Matthew 18:1-6

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 18:1-6

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 131, 476, 46, 522

Series: Occasional

Theme: Jesus teaches his disciples about the importance of becoming child-like and of protecting others who are similarly vulnerable.

Proposition: Brothers and sisters, Jesus calls us to recognize our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of one another and to accept our pastoral responsibility for each other.

**Introduction**

We all understand something of what it is to be vulnerable. Many in our city and country have felt their own vulnerability more acutely over the past days. My dictionary tells me that to be vulnerable is to be ‘*susceptible to receiving wounds’*, ‘*exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally’.* The Muslims who were praying in mosques here in Christchurch last Friday week were vulnerable to attack by an armed terrorist. **In a broken world, vulnerability results in suffering and death.**

Children have been especially vulnerable in all societies throughout history. Infanticide, the killing of unwanted babies, was common throughout the Roman Empire and in other parts of the ancient world. In this ‘modern world’, According to the World Health Organisation, **every year in the world there are an estimated 40-50 million abortions**. This corresponds to approximately **125,000 abortions per day**. In a broken world, vulnerability results in suffering and death. It has been this way since our first parents rebelled against God. Young children are physically weak, limited in their strength and knowledge, and dependent on others for their needs.

It is very clear from Scripture that God cares for the vulnerable and calls His people to share in His compassionate concern e.g. Deut 27:19 "'*Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow*”. James 1:27 “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*”.

In our text from Matthew 18, Jesus teaches his disciples about the importance of becoming child-like and of protecting others who are similarly vulnerable. To be great in the kingdom of God is to become like a child, to willingly embrace humility, frailty, and weakness. Christ’s call to us, brothers and sisters, is to embrace vulnerability.

Let’s look at the words of the Master in more detail now under three headings:

a) The importance of humility

b) The necessity of care

c) The greatness of Christ

1. **Our need of humility**

The disciples of Jesus had a question for him “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Just as human societies have a structure with some people in higher positions of power, authority and status than others, so the disciples assumed that it would be so in the society of people who are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

We might think, if we just looked at the account of this event from Matthew’s gospel, that this was an innocent, theological query from the studious disciples of Christ. However, the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke show us the true motivation behind the question: *“The disciples had been arguing amongst themselves as to which of them was the greatest”* (Luke 9:46; Mark 9:33-34).

When you have chickens in a hen house, they quickly organize themselves into positions within an established hierarchy - each bird pecks another lower in the scale without fear of retaliation and submits to pecking by one of higher rank. In this way a pecking order is established. The more vulnerable (‘susceptible to receiving wounds’) the lower the rank. The disciples here wanted to establish an ‘apostolic pecking order’. Each one hoping to be at the top of the hierarchy.

What then was the heart motive behind their question to Jesus ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’? Surely it was pride. ‘Undue confidence in, and attention to, one’s own skills, accomplishments, state, possessions, or position”. Augustine said “Pride is the beginning of sin. And what is pride but the craving for undue exaltation?” G.K Chesterton said, “If I had only one sermon to preach it would be a sermon against pride.”

We are going to see in a moment what Jesus says in response to the pride of his disciples, but first notice what he doesn’t say.

* He doesn’t preach a sermon against pride!
* He doesn’t rebuke his disciples.
* He doesn’t scold them for their insensitivity to his approaching agony (which he’d just spoken about - Mark 9:30-32).

In his great grace and wisdom, instead he calls a child to come to him. It is very clear from many places in the gospels that children were frequently present around Jesus during his public ministry e.g. Matt 14:21; 15:38; 18:3; 19:13, 14 (cf. Mark 10:13-14; Luke 18:15-16, 21:15-16; 23:37). Jesus focusses the attention of those around him to children and their characteristics especially humility.

The Old Testament connects the quality of humility with Israel’s experience as slaves: “*And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labour*” (Deut 26:6). The word in our text, translated ‘humble’ (v4) literally means to ‘level’ (Luke 3:5), to bow down, to make low. To be humble in the Biblical sense of the word is to acknowledge one’s own vulnerability, weakness and utter dependence on the Lord.

To be humble is:

* To recognize your sinfulness before a holy God ("Woe is me! For I am lost” – Isa 6:5a)
* b) To willingly place oneself under God’s authority, desiring to obey Him in everything (Deut 8:2)

Just as pride has been said to be the root of all sin, there is a case for saying that humility is the root of all godliness. It is in my estimation, humility is the most difficult Christian virtue to attain. As soon as we think we’re making significant progress, pride comes pushing in! Have you not found it so? Why do people like us find it so hard to be humble? Because in our natural, fallen, nature we are self-centred, not other-centred. We love ourselves more than we love God and other people.

How then can we gain this most vital quality of humility? Well in one sense we cannot. This is utterly impossible for us. No amount of self-help, self-improvement techniques will gain this goal of true humility. There is only one way, as Jesus expresses to his listening disciples: "*Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt 18:3). To turn here is to be radically changed, converted, doing an ‘about face’ a 180 degree turn from our self-centred nature to a Christ-centred, other-centred existence.

This is only possible to ‘turn’ this way through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit as Jesus said to Nicodemus: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (John 3:3). Is everyone here present today a born-again believer, having been regenerated by the Holy Spirit? Many are, but possibly not all.

I want to speak now

* To any who have not turned and become like children
* To any who have not humbled themselves before God
* To any who have not recognized their own sinfulness.
* To any who have not placed themselves willingly under Christ’s authority.
* To any who are at risk of never entering the Kingdom of Heaven

Don’t remain as you are. Desire, seek, to be turned. How? Come and talk to me after the service or to anyone else here willing to show you the way. Brothers and sisters if you are someone willing to help others here find the way into the kingdom of heaven will you please stand now so that any who are seeking that way may be able to identify you as a guide and a helper; an ambassador for Christ.

You see, fellow Christians, we all have a responsibility for pastoral care towards others, as we’ll see in our second point:

1. **Our need to care for others**

Jesus is not teaching here that children are innocent. The natural fallen human heart is evident in young children who behave selfishly, demanding that their needs be met, throwing tantrums and thinking only about themselves. Such attitudes and behaviours are not restricted to the young, but are sadly also displayed at times by teenagers, adults and seniors.

True humility is demonstrated in a heartfelt desire to care for others. We saw last week from Matt 25 that the standard of assessment which Jesus spoke about applying on the Day of Judgement was loving care and kindness towards other believers, other disciples. A willingness to meet their basic needs for food, drink, clothing and relationship.

As in last week’s text from Matt 25; Jesus identifies with each person who follows Him with child-like humble trust and obedience. We see his solidarity, his union, with each one of his disciples – with each one of us brothers and sisters - with his words in v5: *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me”.* The focus of Christ here is not on children themselves, but rather on disciples who have child-like qualities like humility, dependence, and vulnerability.

The need to care for other believers is strongly emphasized by Christ in these words of warning "*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 depth of the sea*” (Matt 18:5-6).

Millstones were widely used in the Bible times for the grinding of grain. They were shaped like a donut. In the middle of the upper millstone was a hole through which grain was fed in order to be crushed between the two rotating stones. The millstone in view here is not that from a small hand mill, but a much heavier object drawn by a donkey. The message is clear: a relatively quick death by drowning is better than the fate which awaits those who do not care for his disciples.

The word translated in our ESV ‘cause...to sin’ is the Greek word meaning ‘cause to stumble’. We can be the cause of another believer stumbling by doing or saying anything which gets in the way of effective discipleship. There is a weighty responsibility on all those in positions of leadership. This is why James wisely writes:“*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*” (James 3:1).

Teachers have great potential to cause their students to stumble through unwise or sinful words or actions. The same is true of pastors, elders and deacons. The same is true of fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers. The same is true of Cadet and GEMs counsellors. The same is also true for each one of us, brothers and sisters, for we all share in a common role as pastoral care workers in the covenant community of the church.

Here are some of the ways we are called to care for one another:

* “…Instruct one another.” ([Romans 15:14](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Rom%2015.14))
* “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love…” ([*Romans 12:10*](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Rom%2012.10))
* “…Love one another…” ([Romans 13:8](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Rom%2013.8))
* “…Serve one another in love.” ([Galatians 5:13](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Gal%205.13))
* “Carry each other’s burdens…” ([Galatians 6:2](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Gal%206.2))
* “Be kind and compassionate to one another…” ([Ephesians 4:32](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Eph%204.32))
* “…Admonish one another ([Colossians 3:16](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Col%203.16))
* “…Encourage each other…” ([1 Thessalonians 4:18](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Thess%204.18))
* “…Build each other up…” ([1 Thessalonians 5:11](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Thess%205.11))
* “…Pray for each other.” ([James 5:16](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/James%205.16))
* “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” ([1 Peter 4:9](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Pet%204.9))

Brothers and sisters, in light of Christ’s words in our text, it is wise for each one of us to ask ourselves:

* Have I caused a fellow believer to stumble through what I have said or done? Or
* Have I caused a fellow believer to stumble through what I have not said or not done?

Perhaps you are an office-bearer who has not been a ‘good example to the flock’ (1 Pet 5:3). Perhaps you are a parent or grandparent who has been harsh and unkind to your children or grandchildren (Eph 6:4). Perhaps you are a Cadet or GEM counsellor who has not imitated the character of Christ well in your leadership (1 Cor 11:1). Perhaps you are a congregational member who has neglected to kindly and compassionately love, serve, encourage and extend hospitality to other disciples of Christ. Perhaps you are guilty of abusing children or young people in your care.

Perhaps as an office-bearer, parent, grandparent, Cadet or GEM counsellor, or in the role which we all share of pastoral care worker, you have come to see that you have caused another to stumble. What should you do? Is your fate to be worse than drowning with a heavy weight round your neck?

No, not necessarily. There is hope for each one of us, whatever we have done or left undone. However much or little we have been a cause for stumbling to others who seek to follow Christ. Here is the way:

* Firstly approach God like a child with humility and vulnerability. Repent, admit to God the wrong that you have done and seek forgiveness through the shed blood of Jesus.
* Secondly consider approaching the person you have harmed with humility and vulnerability and admit your fault.

Those who are great in the kingdom of heaven are willing to humble themselves so that they may receive grace and help in Christ, which brings us to our final point.

1. **Our need of Christ**

There’s a bit of a running joke in catechism classes, that if you don’t know the answer to a question, try ‘Jesus’. Of all the people who have ever lived, which person do you think has made themselves more vulnerable than anyone else? Who has been most ‘*susceptible to receiving wounds’*, most ‘*exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally’?* I want to suggest to you that Jesus Christ made himself more vulnerable than any other person who has ever lived.

“*He made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*” (Phil 2:7). Although He is God, worthy of all worship and service from all mankind, He ‘*came not to be served but to serve*’ (Matt 20:28).

This afternoon, in our second service, we’ll look in more detail at the vulnerability of Christ as we consider his suffering during his whole life on this earth. If you can join with us then, that would be an encouragement for all who come.

On the cross at Calvary, Christ was despised and rejected by men, stricken by God and afflicted. Wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, oppressed, cut out of the land of the living, put to grief as he bore the sin of many (from Isaiah 53). How was this possible for the Son of God through whom all things that were made came into being? (Col 1:16) How did Jesus let this happen when He had the power to still storms, heal the sick and raise the dead to life?

Remember His words in John 10:17-18 “*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord*”. Jesus was willing to make himself vulnerable, even to the point of death on the cross. Jesus was willing to humble himself like a child, to become utterly dependent (think about his conception, birth and childhood), to submit Himself completely to His Father’s will.

Why? So that naturally proud people like us could be forgiven and could gain entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. So that naturally proud people like us could receive new hearts capable of true humility through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. So that naturally self-centred people like us could learn how to care for one another as fellow vulnerable family members.

What then does this look like in the church? Here are some thoughts on child-likeness in the church:

1. A community where disciples of Christ are strong enough to be vulnerable with others, wisely speaking of their weaknesses and failings not to perversely elevate themselves, but so that others can see that they too need the strength, grace and truth of Christ.

I am not suggesting here that we should reveal our deepest struggles to everyone in the congregation in full detail all the time! However, I do think that in light of our text, there is a call to be open and ‘authentic’ with one another.

Robin Bartlett is a pastor who went through a painful divorce – is there any other kind for a Christian? He writes about coming to church: “*I was mostly just vacant and empty when I wasn’t crying. It was messy. I showed up messy. It was the only way I could show up*”. “*My church was a place that normalized broken people. It was a place where others admitted they were broken, too*”.

Church should be a place where it is safe to be yourself with others, safe to be vulnerable. A community which loves truth and grace and abhors gossip, slander and favouritism.

1. Child-likeness in the church is seen when disciples of Christ understand that God is pleased to use weakness for His glory. Remember Paul who came to be content with his limitations understanding that when he was weak, he was strong (1 Cor 12:10b).

Robin Bartlett records what he said to the church where he is currently the minister: “I want to tell you that I’m worried sometimes, as your pastor. I am worried that sometimes some of us are too afraid to show up messy. I am worried that we only come to church when we are capable of putting on our best happy face; our best pretend self. I am worried that we only come here when we are feeling well, or when we can at least pretend to be OK. I have met with too many of you who say that you can’t come to church for whole periods at a time because you “are not at your best,” or “can’t smile right now,” or that you “don’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

1. Childlikeness in the church is seen when brothers and sisters care for others so much that they are especially careful not to be a cause of stumbling. They are willing to enter into close relationships where they are vulnerable, open to being mistreated, misunderstood and rejected so that they can extend kindness, compassionate love, service, encouragement and hospitality to others

Congregation, in considering the application of this text to us, I think that we need to be a more vulnerable church. A community where people more readily see our personal weakness, our dependence on Christ and our commitment to active discipleship of others. Vulnerability means taking off the masks we so often wear and being honest with others about the people hiding behind them, ‘warts and all’. Vulnerability means facing tender moments, intimate fellowship, with bravery.

Bartlett writes “We need to attempt this kind of courageous vulnerability with one another. We need to challenge each other to show up in church community when we aren’t ready to—before we have put on our make-up, before we have been cured of our disease, BEFORE we get on meds for our depression, BEFORE we get sober, BEFORE we have gotten re-married, BEFORE we have put on our best Sunday wardrobes and our BEST Sunday smiles. BEFORE we get a job after a long time of unemployment. Our task is to be brave enough to show up before we’re ready to. To risk exposure. To risk being disappointed in the outcome. To trust others to be able to hold our brokenness, even when we know they could fail us”.

Our task in becoming like children is to risk vulnerability. In our text, Jesus teaches that abundant life comes not through the gaining of power, influence, authority or high status, but through displaying child-like vulnerability. Abundant life comes not through our peronal accomplishments, but through caring for one another. Brothers and sisters, Jesus calls us to recognize our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of one another and to accept our pastoral responsibility for each other.

Have you heard the voice of Jesus this morning? In light of his Word, how will hearing this change the way you live in the future?

AMEN