

1 Gaudete – Matthew 11

John the Baptist pointed people to Christ. He was the prophet who prepared the way for the Lord who was coming in the flesh. He wasn't a reed shaken by the wind. He wasn't a softy, coddled and spoiled in a mansion. He lived off the land, wore camel's hair, and wasn't moved by those who were considered important. He was more than a prophet. His work was foretold by God through the prophets who went before him. For this reason, Jesus says that there never has appeared any man born of a woman who is greater than John the Baptist. John was a great man with a great confession and a great office. But even greater than this, Jesus says, are the least in the kingdom of heaven.

But what does Jesus mean by the least in the kingdom of heaven? In the fifth chapter of Matthew, during Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he warns that those who break one of the least of the commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus uses a different word here. In fact, he is describing the opposite kinds of people. In his Sermon on the Mount, he is warning against those who ignore even the smallest teachings of Scripture, disregarding the Word of God. They will be called the least, that is, the last. They are those who put themselves first, exalting themselves while looking down on others in the kingdom. They disregard God's Word when they decide that it isn't important enough or when it tells them to repent. They are too proud to humble themselves before God's Word, especially when they hear it from those whom they consider too small and insignificant. But here, in our Gospel lesson, Jesus is talking about those who are the smallest in the kingdom of heaven. These are those who are not given much attention in this life. They aren't great prophets or teachers. They are poor in spirit, mourning over their sins, and finding joy only in the message John and all faithful preachers proclaim.

In the eleventh chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is casting out demons and teaching people about his victory over the devil. Suddenly, a woman cries out from the crowd and says, "Blessed is the womb that gave you birth and the breasts that fed you!" She was saying something good about Jesus' mother. And of course, she was right. When the Virgin Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, Elizabeth said to her, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child of your womb!" Of all the women who have ever been born, of all those mothers who have ever been blessed with a child, no one was more blessed than Mary. She bore in her womb the very Son of God. Yet, what made Mary especially blessed was what Elizabeth said next: "Blessed is she who believed that the Lord would accomplish what he promised her." So when Jesus heard this woman in the crowd bless his mother, he responded, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it!"

Just as Mary was blessed among women, so was John the Baptist the greatest among all men. And rightly so. The one bore the Lord in her womb, and the other prepared his way by preaching his Word. Yet, even more blessed, even greater than these are those who hear God's Word and keep it. Even greater than those who faithfully preach the Word of Christ without wavering are those who believe this Word. They drink deeply of the living water of the gospel. They take comfort even in the smallest details of the gospel. They don't reduce the gospel down to a couple one-liners so that they don't have to think about it too much. No, they delight in every bit of it.

2 Gaudete – Matthew 11

Why? Why do these smallest in the kingdom delight in the smallest details of the gospel? Because they know they need it. They know they are weak. They know that, if it were left up to their own reason and strength, they would only refuse God's grace. So they take comfort in the fact that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who, without any of their own cooperation, has given them a new heart and new life through his Word. They know that God's law is good and that no matter how hard they try they cannot meet up to it. So they never tire of hearing that Jesus has fulfilled the law for them. They know how easy it is to fall into temptation. So they don't forget their Lord's temptation in the wilderness when he faced the devil on their behalf. They hunger and thirst even for the smallest piece of bread and drop of wine in the Sacrament, because they know it is Christ's own body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of their sins. These least – or rather smallest – in the kingdom are greater even than the greatest prophets.

John, who steadfastly pointed people to Christ, now sits in prison awaiting his execution. He has been brought low. He has decreased from a free man to a prisoner. He has gone from multitudes of people coming to hear him preach to sitting alone in a cell. From this low and small spot, John sent his disciples to Jesus, just as he always did. He sends them to ask Jesus if he is the One who is coming or if they should wait for another. Now, is John asking Jesus this for his own sake or for his disciples? After all, John knew Jesus was the Christ. He baptized him in the Jordan River. He pointed him out to his disciples and declared him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John believed Jesus was the Lord who was coming to bring salvation. Of course, he is sending his disciples to ask this question for their sake.

But as a steadfast and faithful preacher, if there was anything John knew about himself it was this: His faith did not depend on his own reason and strength, but on the words of God. So as he was sitting in prison, he was no doubt pondering the words of Christ recorded by Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me because the LORD anointed Me to tell good news to those who are suffering, to announce liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners. (Isaiah 61:1)

John knows that Jesus is the Christ. But as he sits in prison, he no doubt wonders when Jesus will fulfill these words of Isaiah. When is he going to announce liberty and freedom to John who sits in prison wasting away? Even though John has stood firm and hasn't been shaken by any wind of doctrine, he still knows that he needs Jesus' help. And more importantly, Jesus knows what John needs. Jesus knows that John is the greatest prophet his Father ever sent. But even more than this, Jesus knows John as one he came to save. When Jesus had come to be baptized in the Jordan River, John said, "I need to be baptized by you." He was right. Jesus knew John was right. So he sends John's disciples back to tell him what they hear and see.

The Christ, who was promised by God through the prophets, has fulfilled the words spoken about him. Isaiah also recorded that the Christ would heal the blind and the crippled, that he would cleanse those with leprosy, make the deaf hear, and raise the dead. He has proclaimed good news to the poor and afflicted. And finally, Jesus ends with these words: "Blessed is he who is not offended because of me."

3 Gaudete – Matthew 11

Here, Jesus is certainly confirming the faith of John's disciples. He is showing that the works he is performing are exactly the works the prophets said the Christ would do. This gives assurance to all those listening that Jesus is the Christ promised by the Scriptures. But these words of Jesus are spoken especially to John as he sits in prison. Blessed is John if he isn't offended by Jesus not releasing him from prison. Blessed is John if he doesn't fall away, turn against Christ, and lose his faith. These words are given specifically to strengthen John and prepare him for the greatest thing God has given him to do. Jesus prepares John to face his death with faith in the words he was sent to teach.

This is what makes John even greater than his own work and reputation. It is that he receives from Jesus his Word to strengthen his faith, the greatest and most blessed gift of all.

The Apostle Paul was a faithful steward of God's Word and sacraments. He was a good servant of Christ. He completed several missionary journeys and had worked harder than any man to spread the gospel. He could honestly say that he did not know of anything against himself. He could count all human judgments and criticisms to be very small things. Yet, he knew that he wasn't righteous before God on account of this. And right near the end of his life, what does he say? To what does he lay claim? He says, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. (2 Tim 4:7)" The most important thing for Paul wasn't how successful he had been in planting congregations or how much his name would be remembered in this world. It was that his faith remained living all the way to death, and he was looking forward to receiving the crown of righteousness promised by Christ to all those who wait for his appearing. The greatest preachers and confessors of God's Word are nothing if they don't recognize what they themselves need. They need Christ to cover their sins with his own blood and righteousness. They need the Holy Spirit to strengthen their faith. They need the Father of all mercies and God of all comforts to comfort them in their afflictions. They need God's Word of grace to keep them from falling away.

We are to give double honor to those who, like John and Paul, remained faithful and immovable in their preaching, teaching, and confessing. We should honor all faithful mothers, who like Mary and Elizabeth, received their children from God and faithfully raised them in reverence toward him. These people are given to us as examples of encouragement. But what God calls the greatest are those who find themselves in the smallest stations, who see nothing good in their natural powers, and who hold onto the Word of him who came to save them. God will give you all a variety of gifts and responsibilities. He will use these duties to support his gospel and strengthen your fellow Christians. He will also take them away. But that gift of faith, which doesn't get any press in this world, is what his Word keeps burning in our hearts. Let us pray:

Great is the one confessing
God's Word of constant blessing;
His works glow like the sun!
But, Lord, You teach more splendid
Are those in angst descended
Relying on what You have done.

So Christ, Your seers declared it;
Your servant, John, prepared it,
Declaring what is true.
Guide me to laud and ponder
Your Word of truth and wonder
And in my weakness trust in You. Amen.