

The Buddy System

Matthew 18: 1-4, 19b-20 At the time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven... if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

When I was a kid, every summer I would look forward to going to Pine Lake Church camp. I have lots of memories: making crafts, helping put together skits that played out bible stories, playing capture the flag, making s'mores while singing songs and telling ghost stories. I loved it all ... except maybe horizontal hour, where we all had to lay down and keep quiet for a whole hour. Other than that I loved it all. But if you were to read my letters home, you would find that the highlight of my experience was when we got to go swimming. And it wasn't until this chapter eighteen jumped out at me one day, many years later, that I realized that daily hour of swimming had a hidden biblical message.

I am told that not much has changed about the protocol for swimming at Pine Lake, but the first day we had to prove our swimming abilities if we wanted to swim out to the raft. Those who were successful would get a band to wear around their wrist; it was a rite of passage. Once everyone tested we then needed to pair up with a buddy, and if you wanted to go out to the raft you had to find a buddy who could also go out to the raft with you. Once you found an appropriate buddy, the two of you would each remove an orange tag from this board and hang them together on a nail that had a number on it and that would be the number for you and your buddy. After doing this you could then enter the water and swim to your heart's content within

the boundaries you were qualified for. Everyone had to have a buddy. After some time the life guard's whistle would blow and we would have to stop swimming, grab hold of our buddy's hand, and all the hands had to be connected and raise up before each pair would sound off. "One ... Two.... Three...." After all the pairs had sounded off we could then resume swimming. So the longer it took for buddies to connect and call their number off the longer it took to return to the fun. And that was important because we were only allowed so long on the beach before heading back to camp, so it was in everybody's best interest to get through the role call as soon as possible. This is what is called a buddy system.

The entire eighteenth chapter is a buddy system, maybe not so formally structured as the buddy system at camp, but a buddy system just the same. It's from the book of Matthew which has its own structured pattern. It's divided into five sections; each section includes a pile of parables, miracles and of course a sermon. Our scripture actually is toward the end of the fourth section, but this section actually starts in the middle of chapter thirteen. I must admit after reading this fourth section, I find the writer a little Petercentric to me. Bare with me and I will give you a synopsis of why I draw this conclusion: this section is where we find Peter after seeing Jesus walking on water decides he wants to do likewise, and he does as long as he keeps his eyes on Jesus and away from the fear of the water. A little later when Jesus asks the disciples who they believe Jesus is, it is Peter who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and is praised as having it revealed to him by Godself. As I continued to read these Peter stories I can't help but wonder what is going on in the minds of his fellow disciples. Still later he is there along with James and John to witness the transfiguration of Jesus, who is joined by Moses and Elijah, representations of the Law and the Prophets. It is an enthusiastic Peter who offers to make a tent which they could dwell in, and would represent God's presence among the people. I may sound

like I have something against Peter, but actually, I love Peter. In truth I often find Peter like qualities in myself, usually when I feel God is calling me to put my foot in my mouth. Peter always has something to say, sometimes he is too eager and jumps into things before thinking, sometimes he came out feeling like a fool and other times he came out smelling like a rose. Perhaps, *to the other disciples*, he seemed like the favored one, perhaps there were fears that he would be the greatest. At the end of chapter seventeen, just before entering into the eighteenth chapter, we see Peter again this time concerned about the need to pay the temple tax. Jesus calmly instructs him to go fishing and take from the mouth of the first fish he catches a coin that would cover the temple tax for both Peter and Jesus. It doesn't say for just Jesus nor for his entire entourage, just he and Peter. This is where our scripture comes in, "At the time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" And this is where we get to the sermon portion of this fourth section of Matthew.

Is it a coincidence hearing story after story about Peter that the disciples ask this question? Is the writer of Matthew putting this there because this was the correct sequence of events or did it make a great segue into the sermon? I don't know. But it does seem like the message we are hearing in chapter eighteen, is that there was tension in their midst. The other gospels admit they were arguing amongst themselves, when this question is raised. Now, Matthew doesn't tell us which disciples are concerned about their place in the kingdom, but some obviously are concerned. Jesus recognizes they are focusing on themselves, and he gives this short answer, "you need to change and become like child." Many take this to mean humble innocent, spontaneous, open and trusting, vulnerable and dependent, all the things that I myself love about children. But the writer of Matthew doesn't intend for readers to imitate children, but to *change*, to let go of oneself and the need to be number one. Children were nothing back then

they were property with little to no value. So essentially to make yourself as a child means making yourself nothing, to be of no earthly value. But as Jesus tells us children are of *great* value in God's family. Becoming like a child means giving up the individualistic mentality of self importance and self reliance. This text seems to be the same message, only worded differently, later in 23:11-12, "The greatest among you will be the servant. All who will exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In other words you're not going to be the top dog by focusing on yourself. We are to be watching out for one another. Historically our culture is very individualistic, a "what's in it for me attitude." I admit when I read the headlines this week I got a little scared because I took my focus off of God. Maybe you get scared too. When the spirit nudges us to act with our time and/or funds we may find ourselves asking, "What about me? What about my family?" But I must tell you, watching out for your neighbor is about you too, because we are partners... we are buddies in God's buddy system.

Sometimes being in this buddy system means doing some things that are hard, keeping an eye on your buddy may mean you are called to do the uncomfortable. If someone has done or is doing something that is hurting themselves, you, or another they need to be made aware of it, or they may be doomed to repeat the behavior. Back at church camp when I was swimming around sometimes my buddy was underwater when the whistle blew and didn't know it was time to sound off. Sometimes in life we see a buddy who is in over their head and they don't even know it. Maybe they are drowning in addiction... maybe depression... or maybe just living their life out of fear resulting in bad choices. It may mean confronting someone, something most of us try to avoid, but when it's done in love it can be a great source of healing and growth.

I'll be honest, sometimes you don't get to see the healing and growth right away... in fact your buddy may not even appreciate your alleged help. Jesus tells us not to give up on them, but we are also not to let ourselves go down with them. We need backup. He says pull one... two... three... perhaps even a church full of people to help confront the person. And what's really frustrating is that, in your efforts along with two or three or more, your buddy may still ignore your community of intervention. Your buddy may turn and walk away. In truth you may not see the benefits of your energies, here on earth. But you have to remember that God is with you in the effort and those efforts are not lost. It is my understanding that God extends grace even to the one who turns away from your help.

We are all connected we are all partners in Christ. Jesus calls us to use the buddy system. God is our life guard whose whistle is that of the Holy Spirit. Stay alert... keep watch, because we are only allowed on this beach we call earth for so long, before it is time to go. We only have so long to make a difference. There isn't time to decide who is greatest only time to fulfill your part in the buddy system.