

Michaelmas
St. Matthew 18:1-11

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus said,

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. [For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.]

How dear to God are these little ones! Jesus says that *their angels* always see the Face of His Father. There are angels assigned to His little ones, and they are always before the throne of God. These angels, messengers of God, are much more than part of God's creation that merely gaze upon the Face of the Father. St. John wrote that under the leadership of Michael the archangel, the angels of God cast the dragon and those angels who followed him from the Face of God. The dragon is the devil and Satan, that serpent of old. (cf. Revelation 12:7-9) The prophet Daniel also wrote of Michael, the great prince who watches over the sons of the children of Israel, who on the last day will come at the time of great conflict, but that the people of God would be delivered through it. (cf. Daniel 12:1-2) It is these warrior-messengers of God that keep watch over the little ones, and they are always before the Face of the Father.

It all begs the question; who are "these little ones?" Well, you'd certainly be right in calling them children, but "these little ones" are more than children.

Today's text picks up in St. Matthew's Gospel what you heard last week from St. Mark's Gospel: the disciples arguing about who among them is the greatest and the example of divine humility that Jesus gives is to stoop down to receive a little child—a little, innocent child. So, it is often said of children that they have guardian angels because of their so-called innocence, which is properly understood as naiveté, blissful ignorance, and utter dependence on others for their livelihood. It is said that their guardian angels are often very busy keeping their little ones safe due to the constant danger they put themselves in and often come out of seemingly unscathed. Because of this "innocence," it could be said that children need some sort of guardian angel.

However, like I said, "these little ones" means something more than children—more, even, than believing children—they are the ones, young and old, who have been given faith in YHWH, the only true God, and trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, for their salvation. Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Those who are to enter the kingdom of heaven—that is, those who have been given faith—are described to be as little children. It is that same innocence mentioned before that Jesus is referring to. You who believe and trust in Jesus Christ have been turned, or converted. This is the work of the Holy Spirit when and when He pleases to convert people, as is confessed in the Augsburg Confession (cf. ACV), and having been converted, you become like little children—naive, blissfully ignorant, and utterly dependent on another for your livelihood. Like a little child, a Christian is completely givable to, and without this grace from God, a person would be utterly lost, in this life and for the next.

Therefore, dear Baptized, you have an angel who always sees the face of the Father in heaven. This should be of great comfort to you. Your Father in heaven, in Jesus Christ, has assigned one of his warrior-messengers to you. And this angel of yours is always before the face of the Father who is Jesus Christ, whom the Scriptures describe as the glory of the Father. (cf. John 1:14) It would not be out of line to imagine that your angel is before the face of God in your stead, and certainly for you, holding the place that is yours in glory, as they are there now continually beholding Him as their glory and worshipping Him in eternity.

"For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." (Psalm 91:11 KJV) The first verse of today's Gradual would suggest that in addition to being ever before the face of God that your guardian angel keeps you in all your ways, that they are always keeping watch over you. How

these warrior-messengers are always before the face of the Father and watching over you is a divine mystery, but here they are, keeping a guarding eye on you while reporting to your Father in heaven what you are doing and what you are needing.

And as that little, humble child, you are completely givable to. God gives to you to supply all of your needs. He sends the sun and the rain upon you. He sends messengers who are men to proclaim to you the Word of God—Law to kill you and Gospel to raise you to newness of life. And “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents,” for, you could say, they see their charges receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for their sins and given forgiveness, life, and salvation.

As stated, the disciples were arguing to begin today’s lesson was over who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The idea of being great causes swollen heads and broad shoulders which prevent entrance through narrow gate of Jesus Christ into eternity. (cf. Matthew 7:13-14) This hubristic idea of greatness is sin. Therefore, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

“[W]hoever 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,” Jesus said. So, what would cause one of these little ones to sin? What would cause a person to have an inflated ego and the desire for greatness? If it is a hand or a foot or an eye, it would be better that one enter into eternity without this member. (cf. Matthew 5:29-30) But it isn’t a hand or a foot or an eye that causes sin. How about a teacher or leader or someone that is looked up to? Certainly these could lead one into sin; persuasive false teaching, erroneous charisma, ego-stroking sayings—any of these uttered by someone in a position of authority do and have led many a person into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Many would be better off if these false teachers had a millstone hung around their necks and were tossed into the sea, but these teachers do not cause sin. What causes sin? Jesus answered,

Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him...? What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man. (Mark 7:18b, 20-23)

It is from your heart that evil comes. It is from within. It is your old, evil nature that causes you to sin. From there comes ideas of greatness and the jockeying for position that creates big heads and broad shoulders.

The heart is a vile organ, you could say. The prophet Jeremiah certainly does: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) Not a hand, nor foot, nor eye, nor false teacher will cause you to sin. “The devil made me do it” is a faulty assertion. You sin by your fault, by your own fault, by your own most grievous fault. Any idea of greatness that you may have of yourself, that you are good and right and powerful, is your sin, and it comes from within you.

These ideas of greatness always lead to the idea that you can make it on your own. Parents can attest to seeing it in their children, who develop the idea that they are able to do that thing which you know they cannot do without your assistance or that you must do for them. Yet, they are insistent that they have to do it on their own. They are exploring their greatness; “If I can do this without mommy or daddy, then I don’t need them. I am great enough on my own.” Sin does the same with you before your Father in heaven. It teaches you that you don’t need your guardian angel. It teaches you, even more treacherously, that you don’t need the Savior, Jesus Christ, because you are great enough to save yourself.

But there is only one way to greatness. And that is to be totally given to by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, as a little child must be given to. It is to be humbled to realize that you are totally

incapable of saving yourself and to see your need for a Savior. Thanks be to God that Jesus is always there, that your angel is always before Him, and that He is your Savior to forgive you.

Now, you may be wondering why I'm preaching all of the same kind of stuff that you heard last week, aside from the fact that a lot of it was read again in today's lesson. Well, if you're anything like the man in the pulpit, you did alright with this topic coming away from last week's sermon for the first little while, maybe a day and a half. But, as Old Adam always does, he wars against the goodness of the Word of God, especially that bit which you have most recently heard and read. So, come today, you probably needed to hear it all again. But then, generally speaking, that's why you always hear the Law every week to drown and kill the Old Man and the Gospel—especially the Absolution—to renew and bring the New Man to life. Week-in and week-out, it's always the same thing.

It's no wonder then, that everyone who believes in the Father and trusts in His Son is given a guardian angel, because they daily need God's help and providence. So, by God's grace, Luther has provided daily prayers asking for just that, and for the help of His holy angels. At night, you can pray:

I thank Thee, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast graciously kept me this day; and I pray Thee that Thou wouldst forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the wicked Foe may have no power over me.

And, in the morning when you get up:

I thank Thee, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son, that Thou hast kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray Thee that Thou wouldst keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please Thee. For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the wicked Foe may have no power over me.

In both prayers, you commend yourself into the Father's gracious keeping, humbly acknowledging that you are lost apart from His grace. Both times, you ask for His holy angel to be with you, to guard you against the wicked Foe, just as that warrior Michael cast him out of the presence of the Father. And God grants it because you are His dear little one.

How dear? For you, the Son took on human flesh, descending a little lower than the angels (cf. Psalm 8:5, Hebrews 2:9) and shed His blood on the cross for your forgiveness. For you He died and rose again that you would be turned to Him by His grace and forgiven for your sins. For you, He sends an angel to guard you and keep you in all your ways, and who always sees your heavenly Father's face. You are His dear little one, saved by grace through faith, given to in Jesus Christ, your Savior, forgiven for all of your sins, made to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, you laud and magnify His glorious name here on earth as you look forward to doing so with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven in eternity, evermore praising Him and singing that song that they sing: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8)

For now, you rejoice that you are His dear little one for whom He has assigned an angel who stands before His face. He sees your need and graciously supplies for your need. For now, you sing the songs with the angels while still on earth, as you are daily prepared to be with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. This is yours for the sake of Jesus Christ, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.