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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart! We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson. I'm your host, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger. They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they're pretty good preachers. Okay, let's get started. David, where are we in the church here?

David: We are at the 15th week after Pentecost, a time when the church celebrates the life of the Spirit.

Jessica: And Peter, what's the text for this week?

Peter: The texts for this week are taken from Ezekiel 33, Romans chapter 13, and Matthew 18.

Jessica: So every week in the show, each of you share which text you would preach on. And this week, Peter, you're first.

Peter: Last week, if you recall, I was kind of struck by a statement that Jesus made to Peter in Matthew 16, verse 23, where he said, You are not setting your minds on the things of God, but on the things of man. And when I was looking at that reading, I noticed that the next couple of gospel readings all seemed to kind of lift up one way in which the disciples, and we today probably are tempted to think in human terms rather than set our minds on the things of God.

David: So you're thinking about a series.

Peter: Yeah. So last week, you know, the idea was suffering. Peter would not, could not, he was not thinking about suffering like Jesus was. Jesus was talking about how he would suffer and he would die and rise. And Peter couldn't handle it. So he had to cut him off. This week, I think Peter's thinking, well, Peter and the other disciples, I guess, are thinking wrongly in a different way. And so would you maybe start us by reading Matthew 18, one to four, Jessica?

Jessica: At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of 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 is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Peter: This reading begins with a question, right? It just makes you shake your head, doesn't it? Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? I mean, doesn't it sound like kind of playground, like children?

David: Yeah, king of the hill.

Peter: But I was trying to think of examples of when someone asks a question that that's just kind of the wrong question that you shouldn't even really answer the question as it's asked, because it shows how off their thinking is.

Jessica: Yes, at home, my kids, all the time.
Why do we have to wash dishes? You know, what? School isn't important anyway.

Peter: Yeah, I mean, that's the kind of thing that there's certain questions.
I mean, you learn this as a pastor, you learn this as a parent, you learn this as a teacher.
Sometimes people ask a question and you really shouldn't answer that question.
So an example of this, when the disciples want to call down fire on the village.

David: The Samaritan village.
And should we call down fire?
That's a bad question.

David: Well, even worse would be how much fire should we call down?
How hot do you want it?

Peter: I guess the point that struck me as I was looking at this is sometimes the questions we ask arise out of setting our minds on the things of man instead of the things of God.
And we only ask such questions because it's like your kid asking, you know, why do I have to do the dishes?
And you only ask that question when you have some sort of sense of, well, I shouldn't have to do something like that.

David: Right.

Peter: And so what I like about this text is that Jesus, at least at first, he doesn't really answer the question.
They say, who's the greatest? And you can imagine Jesus looking around and he calls to him a child.

David: Imagine what that would be like, right?
So you're waiting for him to answer who is the greatest and he's looking around and all of a sudden he brings a child in.
And you're going to think, oh, he is so crazy.

Peter: And the fact that he calls a child to himself, he's apparently doing this in front of others.

David: Right.

Peter: I think we kind of know that Jesus was often teaching kind of on the way.
And it's not uncommon for him to say, hey, look at this little child or hey, look at this or hey, look at that.

Jessica: Give me some some cultural context on the view of children, because in our culture, children are so highly valued.

David: Right.

Jessica: And so important, more important than anything else, really.
I mean, it seems to be a cultural norm, but it was different back then, right?

Peter: Yeah, correct.
Especially if you judge by the amount of money we spend on youth sports, you would conclude that the children are very important.
And I don't think this was the case back then.

I think children were basically, well, I think they were helpful when they could help, but they didn't really have a place or I don't think many.

David: Yeah, I mean, Jeff Gibbs does some good work with that.

Peter: Yeah.

David: On laying out in his commentary on Matthew about the role of children in the society.

And it's, you know, we tend to adore children.

We think that they're cute. They're beautiful.

They're, you know, we fill them with images of hope for the future and not the case.

Peter: We live vicariously through them.

David: Right. Right.

Yeah. That's why we spend so much money on the sports.

Exactly.

Peter: What's important, I think, is that sometimes we import things that we think about kids back into that culture.

David: Right. Right.

Jessica: That's why I ask because it changes the whole understanding.

David: Because otherwise you're going to have this really sentimental moment, right?

That's what happens, right?

Peter: Yeah, the idea that children are pure or innocent.

David: Sweet and pure, right.

Peter: Or that they're so trusting.

David: Right.

Peter: That gets me, I mean, you hang out with a little child, they don't trust you at all.

Jessica: Nor are they innocent.

Peter: They're certainly not innocent.

David: Well, maybe not your children.

Peter: It's true.

I remember when my kids were younger and, you know, you'd be in the pool and you'd say, you know, jump, jump to me, I'll catch you.

David: Wow.

Peter: And my daughter would just look at me and, no way.

I don't trust you.

That water's deep. You're crazy.

But sometimes people read a text like this and they say, oh, children are so trusting.

So become like a child, become trusting.

David: Right.

Become pure, become innocent.

Peter: And that I don't think is, I think that's totally reading a current conception of children into the text.

So I think you'd want to do a little bit of look at what a child is back then.

But then, so Jesus turns to them and he grabs his child and he puts the child in the midst of them and says, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom.

Enter the reign of God.

It's not just now who's great and who's not so great.

David: Who's even going to get in?
Peter: You have no place.
And I think you can read it a little bit like this.
This kind of question doesn't belong.

David: Right.
Peter: In the reign of God.
This is not how we think. This is not how we talk.
We don't think about greatness and we don't think about who's ahead of another.
And so Jesus is kind of putting them in their place with this child.
And then verse four there, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
Whoever humbles.
So now we're thinking about, okay, what kind of kingdom is this?
What kind of reign is this?
It's not a reign where there is, greatness is honored or adored.
Greatness is so highly valued in our culture.
And Jesus is basically saying here, that's not the right way to think in this kingdom.
The right way to think is a humbleness, a humility.

David: It makes me think of that moment when Jesus, in the upper room,
when he took off his outer garment and wrapped himself in a towel and started washing their feet.

Peter: Right.
David: So, you know, that's the servant's task.
It was below any of them.
So they all go in and they don't wash their feet at all because no one's there to do it and they're not going to do it.
And then Jesus comes and does it.
And it's just a transformative moment.
And if I, your master, would do this, right?
Yeah.

Peter: Yeah.
And that gets, of course, to Jesus as the one who is the greatest.

David: The greatest by being the least.
Peter: By becoming the least and becoming a servant to all.
David: Right.
Right.

Peter: And so this turns the whole conception of the reign of God upside down in a way that I think would kind of call out the false thinking.
That happens not just for the disciples but with us.
And also gives you a great segue or a great runway to proclaim the humble, sacrificial love of God in Christ.
Beginning with or maybe highlighting this.
I like that with, in a sermon, I might go to that example of Jesus washing the feet.
And if you think that's humble.

David: Right.
Peter: Yeah.
You know, then what followed with his suffering and death.
David: You see what he does with your sin.
Peter: Right.
Yeah.
David: Why do you think that, you think just for you, is it just because culturally greatness is so important to us that that's why you would, that's why you're drawn to that?
Peter: Yeah, I think so.
I think so.
And I think it even seeps into the church.
You know, we do a good job sometimes as Christians recognizing how we're not given into cultural ways of thinking.
You know, some of the social issues, this becomes very obvious.
But the underlying attitudes and behaviors that we manifest, I think, you know, we just are, whether it be what you wear or how successful your church is or how, how pious you are.
David: How many nights a week you spend at church.
Peter: How many nights a week you're at church.
How, I mean, how often do we, you know, kind of humble brag about how overly committed we are.
We're so busy because we're, you know, I got to get my kid to this and then I got to go serve at this.
David: And we all have our standards of greatness.
Peter: We all have our standards of greatness.
And I think you got to, that's so antithetical toward the reign of God in Christ.
And I think that's what Jesus is calling out here with the disciples.
David: Yeah.
Peter: And so I think there's almost no end to how much you could peel back that underlying search for greatness in our culture.
Jessica: What about you, David? What would you preach?
David: Well, you know, I, I looked at the Matthew text and there were just so many different vectors to that text.
You know, there were like four different sermons, you know, portions of it.
And I'm like, oh, I can't do that.
And then, so the Old Testament reading was very, very short.
And I'm like, I need something short and to the point.
And so the Old Testament readings, the one I would go with.
So, Jessica, if you could read Ezekiel 33, 7 to 9.
Jessica: I'm so glad you picked this one because this is the hardest one to understand.
David: Oh, okay.
It's scary.
David: It is scary.
Jessica: Yes. Okay. I'm so glad you picked it.
Okay. Ezekiel 33, 7 to 9.

So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel.
Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.
If I say to the wicked, oh, wicked one, you shall surely die.
And you do not speak to warn the wicked, to turn from his way.
That wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.
But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way,
that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

David: Okay.

Jessica: See, that's terrifying.

David: It is terrifying. I agree.
It's a terrifying text.

Jessica: Great. Explain it to me.

David: Well, it's not so much explaining.
I think for me, it's the the imagery of the text that intrigues me, right?
So you're talking about a watchman or a sentinel, right?
And so you would have a city that would have walls around it.
And there'd be a place on the wall where somebody could stand on top of the wall
and look in the distance and see what was coming.
So if if somebody is coming to siege the city, you would, you know,
it may take them a while to get there and you would be able to be on top of that wall,
see the people coming, and warn the people of what was about to happen.
And so, you know, God uses this imagery of a watchman on a wall who would be ready to call the people to battle,
call the people to arms, warn them of what was coming, blow a horn to, you know,
awaken the people so that they would know danger is on its way.
Yeah. So the imagery picks up this idea of a person who's able to see into the distance
and because what they see, they speak to the people in the city.
And God kind of changes the imagery a little bit when, you know, the watchman is to listen.
And the watchman is going to hear a word from God. Right.
And what was the word that God says?

Jessica: Oh, wicked, you will surely die.

David: Right. Yeah. Oh, wicked, you will surely die.

Peter: That counts as law.

David: I know. And you speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way.

So the the language here is not specific and concrete.
Right. It's not, you know, stop beating your wife.
It's, you know, you shall surely die. Turn from the way.

And so the surely die stuff that evokes back to Genesis.
You know, if you eat the fruit of the tree, you will surely die. Right.
So we've got this very broad, traditional, foundational language that God has laws that are in place for our good.
And God warns us when we're coming close to breaking those laws.
And all of this traditional imagery and language is being spoken to a people who are in a world where everything about their life of faith has been ripped apart.
Ezekiel is speaking to exiles. Right. So they have been taken to Babylon.
The temple has been destroyed. The sacrificial system is gone.
And you are now living in a strange new city, a strange new land.
And God is giving you imagery to let you know that his kingdom is still in this place.
I want you to imagine that the kingdom is still here.
And I want you to imagine that I still bring about the kingdom through words that I speak.
And yes, they're words of warning. But when you are displaced and taken to a world that is completely different, you need you need words of warning to help you figure out how to live in this land.
I mean, you know, you think about that. Your sacrificial system is gone.
Your temple is gone. You're displaced. You're placed in a new land.
It's kind of like, you know, you just cut your losses and try to start anew.

Right.

Peter: I mean, you don't see anything of the old world.

David: Nothing. Nothing of the old world is there anymore.

Peter: The concept of a watchman or a tower or a sentinel or anything like that.
There is no wall.

David: No, there is no wall. There is no city anymore.

Peter: Right.

David: We are exiles. We're not living together among ourselves. We're just kind of spread out in this land. We've been exiled and the kingdom has fallen apart.
And so let's just move on. It's a new day and let's pick up the pieces and move on.
And yet God has a word for people who are living in a world that has become vastly different.
And it's a word that is saying there is somebody that I am appointing who's going to speak a word that helps you recognize the kingdom.

Peter: The word itself and the sending of the watchman itself is a gracious thing.

David: It's an amazing, gracious thing, even though it's a scary word.

Jessica: Well, it's scary for two reasons. First of all, because the personal responsibility that you would incur.

David: Right. That the watchman has. Right.

Jessica: It is also scary because it kind of sounds like you should go on a street corner with a sign that says repent or burn.

David: Right.

Jessica: I think it could be an excuse.

David: Well, there's a word about life. God's desire is for people to have life, not death.
And the word is calling people away from the things that lead to death toward a way that leads for life.
And I this is a really, really, really bad analogy, but I'm going to say it.

Peter: Those are the most to think about. Maybe not to preach.

David: I know. Just think about it.
That's right. Yeah. I was playing pickleball.

Jessica: Your last analogy was about pickleball too.

David: I know. Did I really talk about pickleball?
Oh my gosh. I am so old. Yes.
So I was playing pickleball and my partner. I have this problem when I'm playing pickleball.
I get into the game and I just want to hit the ball as hard as possible, even though you should hit it really lightly sometimes.
But I'm in the game and I'm just my goal is to hit the ball and get it over the net.
Right. And I'm not watching the lines, which means that there could be a ball that's coming too high in the air.
And, you know, I'm six feet four inches. I might not recognize that it would go out if I let it go.
Instead, I'm like, no, I'm going to jump and kill that thing.
Right.
So I'm so into the game that I don't watch the lines.
And so I said to my partner when the game started, I said to my partner, I said, if you could watch the lines,
I said, then I will I should just just call it if it's going out. And it was great.
It worked great because if if I heard him call, it's out. I would just pull back and stop.
But if he didn't call, I would just keep playing. And so I was free to play the game because I had somebody who was calling the ball when it would go out.
You see what I'm saying? Yeah. And so you're you know, you've been taken into exile.
You're playing pickleball. There's no lines that anyone can see.
You don't even have a paddle, but you're still trying to play the game and you don't know how to do it.
And somebody is calling the lines for you.

Peter: The street corner thing is sometimes that that comes across or is delivered in a way that seems almost angry and

condemning instead of let me I'm trying to help and I'm trying to bring this good news.

David: Right. That what you're trying to do, the goal is to prevent people from dying.
The goal is to help people who are living in a world that has gone so haywire, they have no idea how to walk the way. It's so hard to walk the way I'm and I am in the game. I want to walk the way and I'm trying to walk the way. But I need somebody to tell me where the lines are because it's crazy out there.
And so the watchman is kind of calling the lines for you so that you're free to to live.
You're free to try to live.

Peter: And this appreciates or this recognizes that Ezekiel is talking to the house of Israel.

David: Right.

Peter: This is the household. It's not it's not him going to the nations with this message.

David: Right.

Peter: And so I'm reading this and I'm thinking about the community of believers and the role that the preacher has to do this gracious work.
Of kind of calling the lines and helping helping the members see it's kind of a second or third or fourth step would be OK.
What about kind of going out into the community? But let's start right here.

Jessica: So you're talking to people who want to play pickleball.

David: Right.
Not the people who are already in the game.

Jessica: They're not watching from the sidelines and you're yelling at them.

David: No, these are the people who are already in the game. But the whole court has been destroyed.
The net's not even there. I may not have a paddle, but we're still we know that.
We've been called to play the game and we just don't know how to do it.

Peter: And that I mean, we're not in exile entirely, but man, I'm sure those congregations who feel like that.

David: Well, yeah.

Peter: That the things things have crumbled and that's not what it used to be.

David: It's not what it used to be. So how do we how do we continue to be Christians?

Peter: Right.

David: I don't want to walk away from the church. I don't want to leave the church.
I want to be a Christian in a world that's gone haywire and I'm just trying the best I can.

Peter: So Dave, let's think about this just a little bit. How do you preach this sermon as a pastor without focusing too much on yourself?

David: Yeah, I know that's the problem.

Peter: That's one thing I want to it's always it was always a little weird to talk about yourself as the pastor and your role. And so I'm wondering if maybe you could get at this by talking about a watchman in your life as someone who's kind of like what you do at the pickleball thing. But instead of saying, I'm the watchman, you guys, I'm going to tell you where the lines are. I've had a watchman.

David: I've had a watchman. And here's what it does for me. Right. It frees me up.

Peter: And in doing so, you don't even have to talk about yourself and your role as watchman.

David: Right.

Peter: But you can you can be that person by sharing how someone has been that for you.

David: Right.
Yeah, I would agree. And that that the you know, and that's what godparents are. Mm hmm.
You know, I mean, I think you can think of our roles as parents and godparents.

Peter: Okay, so here now I like what you came up with godparents because godparents are kind of hard. How do you address godparents? And it's kind of thing you want to remind people.
A lot of Christians are godparents to kids and they're not quite sure what to do.

David: And just think about why do you choose a godparent? Because you know.

Peter: To show who's the favorite uncle.

David: No, no, that's not why. No, you choose a godparent because the world could go haywire.

Peter: Yes.

David: You could lose your life. Who knows what's going to happen? You could walk away from the faith.
But at this point in time, I want to make sure if that happens to me,
I want to make sure that somebody's there to take care of my kids.

Peter: So you could, you could, I'm thinking in a sermon, you could either share,
maybe some of you who are listening have stories of godparents who have done that.
Maybe you haven't, but you can just imagine that kind of situation.
Or you can just call to mind the last baptism that took place in your congregation and say,
do you realize what the godparents were doing up here?

David: Right.

Peter: They were being installed as watchmen for this child.

David: Yeah, I mean, I think, Jessica, I think you are right. You are, you are spot on that we hear this text and we're kind of like,
oh, there's this mean, nasty, angry god who is going to be attacking people.

And this is what the culture hates and everything.
But I think the way to read the text is like you were saying,
to think of it not as this is the god at work out in the
culture.

This is a god working among his people and speaking to his
people
and assuring them that I have placed a watchman for you so
that somebody's going to be there to call the lines for you.
And I think, I think husband and wife sometimes act as a
watch person for one another.

Peter: Well, and this is, this is part of the mutual conversation
and consolation of brothers
and sisters that we talk about as Lutherans where we serve in
those capacities for each other.
The pastor does it on behalf of the congregation, but all
members,
all believers speak this word of warning sometimes and of
comfort.
And you become a community. What I love about the
possibilities of this text is you become kind of a community
of those who speak the word of God to each other.

David: Right.

Peter: And you build

David & Peter: out of love.

David: And you recognize why you need it, why you need that word
sometimes.

Peter: Right.

You know, so that it's heard as not just criticism but gift.

David: Right. Right. Yeah.

Jessica: And that's all for today. We have free resources to guide
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Join us next week here at Lectionery Kickstart when Dr. David
Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger spark your thoughts for next
Sunday.

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