

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 20, 2015
Text – Mark 9:30-37 "A Crazy, Upside-Down World"

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pablo Picasso is considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. He helped develop the style of "cubism," one of the most influential of modern painting styles, and later Picasso turned to surrealistic figure studies.

His works are world-famous and extremely valuable, but let's face it: some of Picasso's works look as though they were painted by a child – and Picasso himself was aware of this.

Late in life, he visited an exhibition of children's drawings and observed, "When I was their age, I could draw like Raphael, but it took me a lifetime to learn to draw like them."

Picasso looked at the drawings of children and saw art. Jesus looked at a little child standing among his disciples and saw greatness. It wasn't that Jesus thought the child would grow up to be great; no, he saw greatness in the child right then and there.

The disciples of Jesus were stunned because, to them, children were a nuisance and not much more valuable than a piece of property. Jesus surprised his followers by saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

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It was as if an art expert were to visit a Pilgrim Lutheran Preschool class and announce, "All of these crayon drawings are masterpieces – they deserve to be in the National Gallery of Art!"

Picasso and Jesus saw greatness where others did not. Looking at the artwork and the attitudes of children, they saw qualities that are so often missing in adults: spontaneity; trust; wonder; the absence of self-serving ambition; and curiosity.

They saw value in characteristics that many people consider childish and desperately want to outgrow. That's why Jesus insisted, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14).

Some truths are seen most clearly through the eyes of a child. When Jesus was walking with his disciples through Galilee, he taught them about his death and resurrection, but the disciples "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

A child, on the other hand, would have asked good childish questions, such as "What do you mean, Jesus? Tell me, tell me! Come on, Jesus, why is this going to happen?" But the adult disciples just walked along, nodding, unable to see what was really going on.

Instead of spontaneity, wonder and curiosity, the disciples showed caution, anxiety, and concern.

They pushed aside the childish qualities that could have helped them and replaced them with adult behaviors that only hurt them.

Look at what happens when they reach Capernaum. “What were you arguing about on the way?” asks Jesus. He wants to know what all the chatter had been about, and they are too embarrassed to admit that they have been jockeying for position, arguing with one another about who was the greatest.

But Jesus knows their hearts, so he flips their ambitions upside down. He says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Taking a little child and putting it among them, he says, in effect, “Look at this child’s trust, wonder and absence of self-serving ambition. This is the way to me and to my heavenly Father.”

The first must be last. The greatest must be a servant. The one who welcomes a child welcomes Jesus. In the crazy, upside-down world of God’s heavenly kingdom, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Normal expectations are flipped on their heads.

Jesus himself led the way by serving people of every background, extending hospitality to tax collectors, sinners and people – such as children – who were treated as property.

Jesus didn’t always follow the rules of the adult world, says Lutheran pastor Barbara Lundblad.

“He healed when he wasn’t supposed to, touched people he shouldn’t have touched and talked about suffering after a wonderful moment of glory.” In God’s upside-down world, “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And Jesus certainly practiced what he preached.

The kingdom of God seems crazy to many people because it’s a place so different from our own world. There are two kinds of wisdom, says the letter of James: earthly wisdom, and the wisdom from above.

Earthly wisdom includes bitter envy and selfish ambition, and it leads to disorder and wickedness of every kind. Just turn on your television and watch the news for a while.

“But the wisdom from above is first pure,” says James, “then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (James 3:17).

The disciples were not showing this type of wisdom as they walked through Galilee. Instead, their bitter envy and selfish ambition could have made them candidates for a new reality show: “The Real Disciples of Galilee.” They weren’t caught on camera, but they were showing the kind of wisdom that James calls earthly, unspiritual and devilish.

The first must be last: Jesus is uncompromising on this matter.

We are challenged to proclaim the crazy, upside-down world of the kingdom of God, and to “show by [our] good [lives] that [our] works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (James 3:13).

Still, we are to be servants of all, welcoming others as though we were welcoming Jesus Christ himself. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” says Jesus to his disciples, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Looking through children to see Jesus, and then looking through Jesus to see God – this is a new lens for us to use, one that has been provided to us by God.

The Christian writer Philip Yancey was preparing for a class on the Sermon on the Mount while watching a U.S. general give his final television briefing on the Gulf War. As he listened, Yancey realized that he was hearing the words of Jesus in reverse.

“Blessed are the strong. Blessed are the triumphant in spirit. Blessed are the liberated. Blessed are the conquering soldiers.” The exact opposite of the Sermon on the Mount.

And yet, Yancey was not critical of the general; he saw him as someone who “embodies perfectly the qualities of strength, leadership, and confidence our world honors.” So what’s the point? “The Sermon on the Mount expresses quite plainly that God views this world with different lenses,” wrote Yancey.

Looking back over the people in his own life who showed the greatest wisdom, Yancey saw a patient at a leprosarium in India, a civil-rights worker in a jail cell, a mother who lost two children to cystic fibrosis, a priest who worked at a home for the severely disabled, a minister who ran a hotel for the homeless.

Yancey concluded by saying that he initially pitied such people, then he came to admire them, and finally he envied them. They saw life through a different lens — the God lens.

To do God’s work in the world, Jesus says that the first “must be last of all and servant of all.” But that’s not the end of the story. When we enter the kingdom of God, we discover that the last actually become first.

So maybe it is our current world that is crazy and upside-down, not the kingdom of God.

Christianity can turn us on our heads, but as it does this, it is really setting us right-side up. Our faith can help us look at things through a God lens and live in a way that is full of mercy and good fruits.

When we are right-side up, we show respect to little children, knowing that such behavior honors Christ. This includes embracing children who are unwanted, neglected, abused and ignored ... children who are overlooked, taken for granted, uneducated and unloved ... children who are hungry for approval, affirmation, intellectual stimulation and Christian education.

If the church would focus only on welcoming the children of the community, it would send a strong message about the values of God's kingdom.

Remember: whoever welcomes a child welcomes Jesus, and whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes God. So if you reach out to children in kindness, you are reaching out to God.

Christians who are right-side up see service as ministry, not as volunteer work. They make financial commitments to the church off the top of their earnings, not the bottom. They show hospitality to strangers, knowing that they might be entertaining angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2).

And they live with spontaneity, wonder and curiosity. In so doing, they discover – as Pablo Picasso did – that it can take a lifetime to perfect such childish qualities.

Jesus says that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. That's the way it is in the right-side-up world of God's heavenly kingdom – and there's nothing crazy about it. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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