

**18 Pentecost
September 23, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

There is a way the world looks at things, and then there is the way that God looks at things. There is a culture of the world, and then there is the counter-culture of God. There is a wisdom of humans, and then there is divine wisdom. There are worldly values, and there are God's values. Today's lessons are about these contrasts ... especially the reading from Mark.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus takes a little child into his arms, turns to his disciples, and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." On the face of it, this tender gesture is so small and so straightforward, it's easy to miss its significance. But consider how radical a teaching this actually is for the disciples and for us. Jesus doesn't say, "Welcome the child because it's a loving or kind or ethical or socially beneficial thing to do. He says ... Do you want to see what God actually looks like? Are you curious about the truest nature of divine power and greatness? Then welcome the child. Welcome the child, and you welcome God.

The context for this remarkable claim is an argument that breaks out among the disciples when Jesus explains ... for the second time ... that he will suffer, die, and rise again after three days. The disciples don't understand a word Jesus says, but they're too afraid to ask questions. Instead, they argue about who among them is the greatest. When Jesus asks what their quarrel is about, they refuse to answer ... they are too embarrassed. But he knows this. So he brings a child into their midst, gathers the child into his arms, and upends his disciples' notions of greatness and power ... "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The readings this morning give us a counter-cultural alternative. In biblical book after book we also hear stories of how God acts and speaks through prophets and others to say that all humans have value ... and how we are to treat all human beings with respect and dignity.

In the political language of today, children are "takers" not "makers." They do not produce anything that didn't need cleaning up afterwards. And they "take" food and time away from the rest of the family. Especially in the time of Jesus they had no status other than potential for the future. They were ... well, just children. Yet Jesus picked one up in his arms and told the crowd around him that they too needed to be like children.

I've heard well-meaning people suggest that Jesus likens children to God because children are so purely good, or unselfish, or accepting, or meek. Well, I don't know children like that ... the ones I know are far more interesting. They're feisty, clever, quick, fierce, generous, selfish, naughty, obedient, curious, bored, quiet, loud, challenging, funny, surprising, solemn, and

exhausting. I think Jesus knew as much when he described children as trustworthy representations of God.

Children teach us to honor our imaginations as pathways to God. Jesus invited the disciples to imagine a world where death doesn't have the final word. Where inexpressible suffering gives way to irrepressible joy. Where resurrection is not merely a possibility, but a promise. But the disciples could not make the leap. Like so many of us, they were bound by preconceived notions of who and what the Messiah must be, and they lacked the imagination to envision a world as revolutionary as the one Jesus held out to them. Think of the people that you know ... or know of ... who allow Church doctrine, dogma, Canon Law, and theology to hold their spiritual senses captive. Welcome the child, Jesus says in response. Open your imaginations. Return to the capacity for wonder, newness, and strangeness you knew as a child.

The cultural wisdom is that some human beings don't amount to much and can be ignored or dismissed. In God's counter-culture we humans ... including children ... especially children ... are all the same. In God's eyes nothing makes us different from one another. We are all made in God's image. And we participate in God's kingdom when we live into this counter-culture and acknowledge and affirm every human being we encounter. In our baptismal covenant we promise to "Respect the dignity of every human being," and when we see the woman or child, or person who dresses differently, or has a different color skin than ours, or speaks a different language ... the stranger, the homeless man or woman standing on the street corner with a sign, the immigrant ... when we see them as a fellow child of God then we are alive in God's kingdom.

Children also teach us what divine power looks like. This, I think, is the most radical lesson of this reading. A young child is the very picture of helpless dependence, of powerlessness, of need. In some cultures, children are socially invisible. In others, they're legally unprotected. In all cultures, children are at the mercy of those who are older, bigger, and stronger than they are. And this ... this shocking portrait of dependence and vulnerability ... is the portrait Jesus offers of God. In the divine economy, power and prestige accrue as we consent to be little, to be vulnerable, to be invisible, to be low. We gain greatness not by muscling others out of our way ... not by being a bully ... not by puffing up our chest ... but by serving others. We gain greatness by empathizing with the vulnerable, the marginalized, the disenfranchised ... and by sacrificing ourselves for their well-being. Whatever human hierarchies and rankings we cling to, Jesus upends as he holds a tiny child in his arms.

"Do we want to see God?" he asks. "Do we really want to see God?" Look to the child in detention at the U.S border. Look to the child a priest is molesting. Look to the child dying of gunshot wounds in his kindergarten classroom. Look to the child that is being trafficked for sex. Look to the child who can't access healthcare, an education, or even something to eat. Look to the child drowning in anxiety and depression. Look to the weak, the small, the simple, the vulnerable, and the helpless. Look to the ones who are not in charge. Look at the tiniest faces, and there ... there ... there you will see God.

Living an alternative counter-culture is not always easy. Living into God's values can be awkward ... often difficult. It is sometimes much simpler to just look the other way or just pass by another without saying hello. When I'm at the supermarket or the post office and I feel rushed, it is not the time I want to catch someone's eye ... I fear they may recognize me and want to chat. Believe it or not, I'm an introvert ... so I can always use that as an excuse to myself.

But just because it isn't easy is not a reason not to do it. If we want a life of abundance ... not necessarily material abundance, but an abundance of peace, and self-worth, and trust, and joy ... if we want a life of abundance, then the cost of participating in God's kingdom ... in the counter-culture of God ... has its rewards. Taking the time to affirm the bag boy at Publix, or talking to the homeless woman on the other side of the serving table at Dining with Dignity, are ways of saying you see them ... and you see them as a fellow child of God. Each time we look another in the eye they are looking us in the eye also. Every time we listen to another we are offering our compassion through empathy, and we are reminded of our own times of having someone listen to us. When we value another we are reminded of our own value in the eyes of God.

One of the most central and amazing truths about Christianity is that God became a helpless human child. In this week's Gospel story, Jesus underscores that stunning truth with another: all children everywhere represent God's heart, God's likeness, God's power. To welcome a child is to welcome the divine. To cultivate childlikeness is to cultivate Godliness. To consent to be little is to become great. Welcome the child.

When we participate in God's counter-culture we give visibility to those who are invisible in the world's culture. Remember, we are all children of God, and all of us ... in our many varieties ... are made in God's image. There is a way the world looks at things, and then there is the way that God looks at things. There is a culture of the world, and then there is the counter-culture of God. There is a wisdom of humans, and then there is divine wisdom. There are worldly values, and there are God's values. I invite us all to be intentional participants in God's kingdom of counter-culture.

Amen.