

Children (upside down 1)
Psalm 8 Mark 10:2-16

Today is World Communion Sunday, a time when our sisters and brothers in the faith will gather in their cathedrals, their churches, their huts or in the open air to celebrate the Lord's Supper. On this day, we make it a point to recognize that although we are different in many ways, we are all children of one Creator God.

And, as radical as it sounds, that God invites us all, every last one of us, to come and be a part of the family. There is no hierarchy, no honor of place, no exclusions, only inclusions. There are none who deserve and none who will be barred.

Imagine that; always welcomed, always included, always loved...no matter our failings, great or small. That doesn't really make sense...it would seem like there should be favorites, or "more loved" or something designating the "better" among us, but there isn't.

Of course, that is precisely why it doesn't make sense, it is totally upside down to the world in which we live and to our understanding of the way the world works. But that is exactly what our theme will be for the next few Sundays; "Upside Down", and I will be exploring just exactly how our Christian faith is not at all what the world around us would proclaim.

In today's Gospel reading we come to the blessing of the children. Years ago, when I was the associate pastor of a fairly large church, I was charged with teaching the Pastor's Class, much like a confirmation class. As a part of the class we explored the church and all its art work, stained glass windows, paintings and the like.

At one painting, showing the story of Jesus blessing the children, one of the youngsters in the class spoke up to share with everyone, "I know what this is! This is about Jesus running a preschool!"

Uh, no.

Although it's tempting to make this a story about Jesus loving children (he did), it's about far more than that. This story is about a way of communicating a truth that was absolutely countercultural. This was absolutely unheard of.

This was a complete reversal of the culture of the day; it was a truth about the Kingdom of God.

In the ancient Roman world, the world that was the setting of this story, there was an absolute and understood hierarchy of power and authority. At the very top, of course, was Caesar. Following Caesar were the members of the upper class, including senators. Below that was the lower class, made up of commoners and more families. Families were led by the father, with women and slaves below them.

The children had no rights in society and were often treated as commodities or worse. When a child was born out of wedlock or with a physical or mental handicap, the father had the right to give the child away or even have the child killed.

Children's value was primarily economic, as workers and heirs, certainly NOT sentimental. After all, you could buy a child if you really wanted one or needed one as an heir. You could take any child of your station or below as your sexual plaything and that was perfectly acceptable. Staking a child out on a hillside as food for the wolves was understood as a perfectly acceptable way of controlling size of the family and the mouths to be fed.

It was into this setting that Jesus comes, telling His listeners to let the children come to him, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

In one bold stroke, Jesus took the entire Roman establishment and flipped it upside down.

Think of it: Those who are at the bottom are now at the top; those who are disregarded by society are favored by God. Those who are on the outside are welcomed into the kingdom. Those who have little value to society have great value to God.

It doesn't take much imagination to understand that this quickly broadens to include anyone who has been shunned by society due to injustice or discrimination.

The message is simple: God's values and the values of society are not the same. In fact, time and again, God lifts up those who are ignored or discarded by society.

As we sit here today, for some it is hard to imagine the impact of this pronouncement. We generally feel that we are comfortably in the middle...high enough to be safe and comfortable, but not so high as to be one of “them” ...the elite or favored targets of Jesus’ teachings.

However, to settle into the comfortable blanket of denial would be a mistake indeed.

For the moment I want to stay focused on the story of the children. After all, things have changed, right? I mean, unlike in Jesus’ time, we take care of our children now. We value them. We nurture them. They are no longer on the bottom of the survival rung, right?

Uh, no.

As I prepared for this sermon I was overwhelmed by the numbers and statistics I found as I researched the conditions of childhood in the world today.

About 20% of the world’s children live in extreme poverty. That means shelter at risk and food at risk. Many having less than 4 meals a week. About 30% of children in the UK live at or below the poverty level. That number grows to nearly 40% in the US.

Now it’s easy to look at the devastation of poverty in the poorest of countries, and I don’t want to single out any one example, so instead I will use my country of birth as a way of explaining these devastating numbers.

Most of these numbers come from 2014, the latest date for compiled figures I could find. These statistics are for the United States. A sampling of other countries showed many more that fared far worse.

So:

One in five children lives in extreme poverty with that number soaring to 4 in 10 in general poverty.

Nearly 1.5 million public school students were homeless.

More than 1 in 9 lacks consistent access to adequate food.

A child is abused or neglected every 47 seconds.

More than 4,000 children are arrested EVERY day – one every 21 seconds.

Eight children and younger youth die from being shot every day. More infants and toddlers die from gun violence than do law enforcement officers.

I'm not sure we have progressed that much since Roman times.

Years ago, we visited our good friends Sam and Cindy Wolff when they were serving in Kenya. Some of you remember Sam as the man who covered for me in my absence while I was on sabbatical.

While we were there we had the opportunity of going on safari as well as going with Sam and Cindy to visit a poor village on the edge of the Serengeti. While on our travel, Sam instructed me in the proper way to greet the people we were visiting.

The village was a Masai settlement: The Masai, known as warriors, a strong and honor focused people.

The tradition from years ago was that in greeting someone from another village, the proper question to ask was, "and how are the children?"

This meant, of course, that peace and safety prevail; the priorities of protecting the young and the powerless are in place; that the Masai people had not forgotten their reason for being, their proper function, and their responsibilities. "All the children are well" means life is good.

Our scripture reading for today compels us to look for ways in which the church can once again become a prophetic agent for change. We simply cannot turn away from these serious concerns.

To pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done," is to work actively to invert the power structures of our lives, our countries and our world today, and to work towards ensuring the life, health and vitality of the least among us, especially our children.

On this World Communion Sunday, as you come to the table, take a moment to acknowledge that EVERY child of God is welcome here.

Are you welcoming?

