

“Little Is Great!”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 22, 2024 - Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

[James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37](#)

Please pray with me... “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”
(William Sloan Coffin).

Have you ever felt as though the whole world has been turned upside down? If not the whole world, you’ve likely had plenty of experiences in your lifetime that have caused you to feel that your own life has been turned upside down. Perhaps your whole life was rearranged through the death of a loved one or the birth of one; a marriage or a break-up; the loss of a home or the forming of a new one; or a change of some part of your identity or how you express yourself to the world. These are just some of the ways that you may have had your own world turned upside down, but you could probably identify several other events or experiences that have caused dramatic shifts in your life. While our own stories are unique, one thing they all share is that their chapters are full of unexpected plot twists that cause their protagonists to begin each new chapter as a different character than when their last chapter began.

In today’s scripture lessons, we are taught that having some parts of ourselves and our world be turned upside down can be a great blessing, for some aspects of our being and the ways of all the world’s people need to be overturned for us to experience the wholeness and peace that God desires for us to enjoy.

In the gospel lesson from Mark, we find Jesus traveling with his disciples, having just returned to Jewish Galilee after their sojourn in gentile regions, where Jesus, surprisingly, healed and served gentiles, who were probably considered by Jesus’ disciples as outsiders wholly unworthy of receiving God’s mercy and grace. Back in Galilee, Jesus instructed his disciples to keep his healing work secret, one of the recurring motifs of Mark’s gospel, for Jesus knew that the more the authorities knew of his miraculous work, the more they would feel threatened by him as a potential messiah who could jeopardize their own power over the region’s

people. Seemingly aware that his own journey was leading in this direction, Jesus told the disciples plainly that he would indeed be killed but then rise again.

The disciples didn't understand (another repeating feature of Mark). Their expectation was that the Messiah, or the Son of Man, as this conquering figure was also called, was to overthrow the powers and victoriously establish a new, just realm on earth. And the disciples believed that in being Jesus' followers, they would be given positions of authority in the new realm he would establish. Even after Jesus had just told them that things were not going to go according to their expected plan, they still held to the hope that they would become rulers over others, and they argued with each other about who was to have the greatest power. So Jesus, seeing that his plain teaching was not sinking in with these fellows, decided to use a couple of visual aids so as to help them better understand.

First, he pointed out a person who was a household food server, or *diakonos* in the gospel's Greek language, from which we get our word deacon, and not just any servant, but the "servant of all," who would have been the lowest rank of the servers and who would have only been able to eat the leftovers after all others had been served. Jesus told his disciples that to be truly great, to hold the loftiest positions, they must be as this last place servant of all, giving to others until they have their fill, rather than taking from others to satisfy themselves.

Jesus then tries to help the disciples understand what being great looks like in God's realm by having a little child be brought in to their gathering. Now it should be noted that children in the Greco-Roman world were not prioritized as they are among us. Quite the opposite was, in fact, true. Children were not valued members of society as they were considered to be not yet fully human. Yale New Testament scholar Judith Gundry-Volf explains that "...children had no legal rights. A father had the right brutally to punish, sell, pawn, expose, or even kill his own child. Newborns could be exposed--abandoned in a public place--where they would generally either die or be picked up by strangers and raised for profit as slaves, prostitutes, or beggars." While Jewish people living in the Roman world had a more positive view of children, many still would have considered them to be the least significant members of a household.

And so, when Jesus had a little one brought to him and his disciples, he invited to be among them a person that was considered to be low in significance. Holding the under-esteemed little one, Jesus stated that his followers should demonstrate greatness by welcoming and serving those who are, like the child, unesteemed and thought to be insignificant, and that by welcoming and serving the lowly, Jesus' followers would truly be welcoming and serving not only them but their Teacher and the Giver of all life.

Just as Jesus overturned their expectation of who he was as their messiah, Jesus turned over their understanding of what it would mean to live as his followers in this new realm he was establishing. In this new realm, the rules would be changed and the ways of the whole world would be turned upside down as the lowly would be lifted and the exalted would be humbled.

James, as we heard in our first scripture lesson, teaches us more about how we are to live in this new realm when he calls us to embrace and practice divine wisdom by humbly giving rather than getting and by making peace rather than taking peace.

This message is just as counter-cultural for us today as it was in the days of Jesus and James. And it is needed just as much, if not more, by us today as it was then. For we still need to have our lives turned upside down, not to selfishly seek to grow our own power and glory, but to selflessly embrace the lowly role of servant, and to actively work to welcome and lift the lowly among us.

Today, will we esteem the little ones of all kinds as being greatly important, just as God does? Will we hang on to the selfish ways of the world, or embrace divine, downside up wisdom of serving the least? Will we make peace with our neighbors by giving to them rather than taking from them? What will we support with our giving? Who will we champion with our speaking?

Friends, may God turn us all upside down today, and may God work through us all to continue Christ's work of turning the world upside down until there is justice and peace for all of God's children. Amen.