

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Romans 13:1-10

Matthew 18:1-20

Some things in life are counterintuitive. Counterintuitive – it means that something that you wouldn't expect to be true, something that violates commonsense, but is nonetheless true. I've had some dumpy cars in my time, rattletraps, clunkers. Have you ever had your radiator blow out on you? The temperature gauge shoots up to "H" and lights flash. Do you know how you keep the car running after the radiator overheats? Turn on the heater and blast the fan on high. It's not very pleasant driving but the hot air is taken away from the motor and put on your lap. Back in the day I was in Chicago in January, in a rented car, driving from the Windy City to Fort Wayne. Frost was accumulating on the inside of the windshield. What are you supposed to do? Either stop breathing or turn on the air conditioner. It's counterintuitive and again, not super pleasant, but it works. Counterintuitive: when you are tired, exercise; it will give you energy. Counterintuitive: when you like someone, appear disinterested; it is intriguing. Counterintuitive: we don't like to appear vulnerable because we think that it makes us look weak. When we see others acting vulnerable, we think they are strong.

On multiple levels, Christianity is counterintuitive. "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). St. Paul said that. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Jesus said that. That's *not* how the world thinks. That is not how our sinful nature thinks. There is great beauty in Christianity. There is great beauty in living a Christian life. Often, it is never found, never explored, never enjoyed fully because it is contrary to the way the world operates, contrary to our expectations. You sometimes stumble because your sinful nature is in the driver's seat. If something that Jesus teaches runs contrary to how your sinful nature thinks, you are hesitant, sometimes very hesitant, to put that teaching into practice. The Lord has more for you than the world can ever offer. Much of it is counterintuitive because He is holy and the (world/you is/are) broken. He is holy, heavenly – we are curved in on ourselves, we are of the earth (John 8:23). Do you not, more and more, want to think like a citizen of heaven? Do you not, more and more, want to discard the worldly philosophy that is all around us and see life (your neighbor) the way Christ sees it (them)?

The disciples ask an earthly question, a power question. "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Greatness; who are the elite in the reign of heaven? Who are the spiritual 1%ers, the prestigious, the lofty and grand? When the question hits Jesus' ears it's like fingernails on a chalkboard. The question is misguided and has the freight of religious manure in it. It is a teachable moment though, a time to reveal what is counterintuitive about God's gracious reign. What Jesus does next is for you. It is for your eyes, your heart, your mind and your spirit. What our Lord says and does has 2020 written all over it. It's pertinent, a daily reality, something for you to inwardly digest and incorporate – the Lord puts a little child in the midst. A child is an emblem of greatness. Not because kids are cute, which they are. Not because they are sweet, but because they are powerless, in need of care, dependent, reliant upon others, their parents.

How many of y'all were happy kids? Do you know what makes for happy kids? When they are loved and taken care of – that's about it. Most kids, little kids, don't worry. Do you know why

that is? Because they don't have to. How many of you, when you were real little, contributed anything to the economy of your household? When Jesus tells the disciples that whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, what do you think that He is telling them? You are a child of your heavenly Father. Whether you know it or not, you are entirely reliant upon Him for everything. Life itself; that is your need. The genuinely humble look to Christ entirely for life. No pretension, no veneer of self-sufficiency spiritually, just naked need, deep dependency. Do you contribute to the economy of your salvation or do you simply receive, like a child, what your heavenly Father gives? You are little – and that is a blessed thing to be.

God has His eye on the little. God leaves the big in the field and goes looking for the little, the one. That's how He rolls. There is no place He won't go to find the little. He searches for them when they go down the dark alleyways of addiction. He ventures after them when they run away into some immoral ditch. He loves the little, the broken, the hurting – they are precious to Him. The little don't puff out their chest, they don't wave their spiritual report card, or go on a self-promotional autobiographical book tour. Don't go big. Go little. Go humble. It's counterintuitive; in God's kingdom, the little are the stars. We pray for the reign of God to be among us – Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done. “God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity” (Small Catechism, The Lord's Prayer, The Second Petition). He makes us little. He humbles us and directs us to where we find life. In Christ you are loved. In Christ, you are taken care of. In Christ, you are given life.

As the Lord teaches, He is implicitly leading you somewhere. He wants you to see what He sees. He wants you to see the lowly as great – great in His eyes, great in His love, great in His service. People are struggling, with great difficulty – people are struggling. Broken families, broken marriages, broken spirits – this year is a troublesome one. When you see the hurting, you are seeing those who are great in the Kingdom of heaven. Treat them as such. Love them, care for them, respect them and bless them. Before too long, Christ the King is going to be blessed with two newborns – two of our ladies are coming to term in their pregnancies. A little baby being brought to the font of Holy Baptism – that is what it is to be little, to be great, to receive the Kingdom and for all of us to see the reign of Christ break in on our happy fellowship. They will be cute. These babies will be an eloquent picture of helpless human beings, utterly dependent upon God and without pretense and therefore great in His kingdom.

The world will ever tempt you to see the big as the great, the strong as the great, the materially wealthy as the genuinely wealthy. It will tempt you to treat the powerful with deference and the weak with disrespect. Christ calls you to reject that perspective. He brings the mighty down from their thrones and He exalts those of low degree. That God would give His Son into death in order to save a world that is rebellious, vain, and cruel – that is counterintuitive. Love led Him to offer His Son. The Father sent the Son knowing what this world would do to Him. The greatest became the least on the Holy Cross. Jesus became large with our sin and hell's gaping maw barked and snapped and hissed. To ensure that not one of the Lord's little ones should perish, Jesus was on that cross, bleeding that blood, praying that prayer of forgiveness: “Father, forgiven them.” His glory reaches its zenith as He is mocked. It is counterintuitive, but that is a divine reality. His power is made perfect in dying weakness. It is counterintuitive but that is a

divine reality – it will never change. This one Man dies and life is secured for our race – the human race. That is what He wants you to see.

Now, He takes the lowest seat to serve you. It is counterintuitive, that the greatest should serve the least but that too is a divine reality; it is what animates this worshipping assembly (Luke 22:27). Jesus said: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20). He has searched for each of us, brought us into His house, set us in the best seat and served us with forgiveness, salvation, and pledged us a future (the Lord is risen and heaven is our home. We are entirely/beautifully reliant upon Him. Life: He is the bread of life, He is the resurrection and the Life, He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. What He wills to give, we happily receive. That bit is not counterintuitive but simple and direct.