

PENTECOST 19B/LECTIONARY 29

October 18, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Isaiah 53:4-12

Psalm 91:9-16

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

When my husband and I were first married, I devoted considerable time trying to build what I thought was a good home – my attempt at being a “Martha Stewart.” I kept a clean, neat little home with what meager belongings we had. I put a nice, hot dinner on the table every night. I kept his uniforms clean and neatly pressed. I’m sure John Mark now pines for those good old days.

Another thing I did back then was to take up... cake decorating. I wanted to present John Mark with some beautiful little edible pieces of art. I read books. I took a correspondence course. I had the full range of pans and tools. And I practiced. Oh, did I practice! All to ensure that I could, to the best of my ability, turn out gorgeous cakes.

This went on for several months – and several additional pounds, I’m sure. But one day – with much fear and trembling, I might add – John Mark came to me with a confession. While he appreciated all the work I put into making these beautiful little cakes, he said that THIS is what really he wanted. THIS ugly thing is his favorite cake.

Is this what it appears to be? When you and I look at it, what we see is the ugly, rusted old pan. We see a plain cake, and certainly NOT one of my beautiful little pieces of edible artwork.

But John Mark saw something completely different. This cake isn't what it appears to be. This cake hides a secret.

THIS is a pineapple upside-down cake. It sure doesn't look like much now, does it? But anybody who's ever baked a pineapple upside-down cake can tell you that its true beauty isn't known until we turn it upside-down. We have to see it from a different point of view to appreciate it for what it is.

† † †

This is what James and John just didn't "get" in today's Gospel lesson – the paradox of God's kingdom. It's upside-down. In Jesus' day everyone was expecting a conquering Messiah, one who would ride in on a white horse with a sword in his hand, to deliver God's people from oppression. Time and again, Jesus tried to explain the true nature of the Messiah to his followers. Time and again, they didn't get the upside-down-ness of the kingdom of God.

Immediately prior to where today's text picks up, Jesus predicts his suffering and death for the third time. But it's as if James and John weren't even listening to Jesus. Because immediately after this prediction, they ask, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

They still didn't see that the kingdom of God is not about power and position. They were jockeying for positions of power and authority in what *they* thought God's kingdom would look like.

The kingdom of God is not about power and conquest. God's will for the restoration of creation is to turn upside-down the ways of the world. It is through the suffering and death of Jesus that God chooses to reconcile the world to Him. But James and John simply didn't grasp this upside-down view of the world.

† † †

Many times in his earthly ministry, Jesus challenged his followers to look at the things of this world from a different perspective. He wanted them to take an upside-down point of view. The world's ways are not necessarily God's ways.

But all too often, the ways of the world are upside-down from what God wills for the world. For instance, many times Jesus said things like, "The world tells you that such-and-such is good, but I tell you..."

There can be no better example of this principle than Jesus himself.

Acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Messiah requires an upside-down perspective.

We need to see Jesus from God's perspective, and not from the world's point of view.

If we only see Jesus from the world's perspective, there's no way we can see Jesus, the true Messiah. In the world's eyes, there wasn't anything about Jesus that should be valued. As today's appointed text from Isaiah says, Jesus was oppressed and afflicted, wounded and crushed. To the world, Jesus certainly didn't appear to be the long-awaited conquering messiah.

But I tell you, here's what Jesus is all about. Jesus is about taking what the world tells you is right and noble and valuable, and turning it upside-down. And who is Jesus? Jesus is the one who suffered on our behalf. He is the one who became a servant to all of humanity.

Back in Jesus' time, it didn't make logical sense that he could be the Messiah. And it makes no more sense to us today.

† † †

One of my all-time favorite movies is “The Right Stuff” about the early days of the American space program. One part of the movie depicts the exhaustive search to determine who will be the first Americans to enter the space program. Members of the Air Corps and Naval aviators are brought together to undergo a series of rigorous tests to select the first batch of astronaut candidates. At the end of the testing, the director of the space program holds a news conference to introduce America’s first astronauts. Reporters start firing questions at the men, until finally, a reporter asks, “Which one of you will be the first man in space?” As one, all the candidates raise their hands. Everyone laughs, until the director of the space program steps in and says, “The *best* will be first.”

This is the epitome of the message that we Americans living in the 21st century continue to uphold as our driving motivation in life – “The best will be first.” In our workplaces, people constantly strive to reach the top of the ladder. The competition is fierce. We compete for who will take home the bigger paycheck, who will have a bigger office, who will have more resources, who will receive more recognition. Competition in our schools is hardly any better. Our children compete to make the best grades, to climb from the junior varsity team to the varsity team, and for positions of prestige among their peer groups. Even in our leisure activities, this sense of competitiveness reigns supreme. Flip channels on the television on a Saturday afternoon and you’ll find that the majority of programs have competition at their core, be they sports or any of the glut of reality-based shows.

But in last week's Gospel reading, Jesus reminded us that “The first will be last, and the last will be first.” Today, he reminds us that while the world may say that our lives are all about power and position, in the kingdom of God this is a lie. The world has got it upside-down. The kingdom of God is not about positions of power and authority; the kingdom of God is about love of God, and love of neighbor. And out of this love flows service. Service to God, and service to neighbor. Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slaves of all.”

† † †

An important way that we, as Christians, demonstrate that we understand the upside-down-ness of the kingdom of God is by how we manage all of those things God's has entrusted into our care. That's our stewardship.

One of the most important ways that we show God's transformative love bearing fruit in our lives is how we manage our finances. Our financial commitment to the work of the kingdom many times speaks louder than our words, for it is the language of money that our culture seems to understand best. As Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." And so we demonstrate to the world that our hearts are with Jesus – that we understand the upside-down-ness of the kingdom – when we firmly commit our finances to ministries that bear Christ to the world.

Until Jesus comes again there will always be more service, and more love, that we servants of God are called to bring to our fellow man. Your financial commitment to the work of this congregation helps us to bring a foretaste of God's kingdom to the world. It helps us to embody God's love to a hurting world. It helps us to be as Jesus commands – servants of all.

Amen.

< 1,469 words >