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St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“Right-Side-Up in an Upside-Down World”

Text: Mark 9:30-37; James 3:16-4:6

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who is the greatest? The disciples would fit in well with our world today. Our world that seems to be obsessed with greatness, and who’s number one. The “Top 25” college football teams. The World Golf Rankings. The “10 Best Dressed” and “10 Worst Dressed” lists. The Fortune 500. The top colleges and universities in America lists. It seems there’s a list for everyone. And today, we have the “Top 12” list of Jesus’ disciples. It’s almost as if they wanted to ask: *Hey Jesus, if you could pick only one disciple, who would it be?* . . . Not that they would ever actually ask Jesus!

So imagine their surprise when after arriving in Capernaum, they find out that Jesus knew what they were arguing about. Oh, He asks them . . . but He already knew . . . and they knew He knew . . . and so they were embarrassed. And then just like last week, Jesus drops a bombshell on them: **“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”** Or in other words, if you want to be number one, be number twelve.

If you don’t get that, that’s okay. The disciples didn’t either. It sounds rather upside-down, like many other sayings of Jesus: to be great, be the least; to be first, be last; don’t let your right hand know what your left hand is doing; if you want to be rich, give everything away. It doesn’t make sense. But people take these as instructions, or commands, of Jesus and run with them, trying to be the first in being the last . . . but if you’re first in being last, are you last, or first? If you’re great at being least, are you least, or great?

But you see, it’s not really where you are on the list that Jesus is talking about here; that’s the problem – it’s your pride. Your pride that wants recognition for what you are able to accomplish. For what you do. For what you are able to achieve. For *at least* being better than *someone* else. It’s your pride, your sinful pride, that separates and divides you from others. That categorizes and strategizes, and stratifies and codifies, so I can say: *I’m here, and you’re not.* What a good boy (or girl!) I am!

Our sin can make just about anything into a pride-filled contest, can't it? Even turning something good into something bad. So what are we to make of Jesus' statement here?

Well, we have to realize that Jesus isn't giving instructions here, as much as an attitude adjustment! That we might stop categorizing and strategizing, and stratifying and codifying, and begin to think differently. Not comparing ourselves with others, not wanting to make ourselves the greatest, but seeing in others an opportunity for service, and in serving them, trying to get them to be the greatest.

Sound crazy? A few cards short of a deck? Yeah, because in our dog-eat-dog world, if you don't help yourself, nobody else will! And you're doomed to be walked on and stepped on and used your whole life. And nobody likes to be a doormat. . . .

So you know what we do, as Christians? We become double agents, living two kinds of lives. We try to adopt the attitude of Jesus here when dealing with other Christians and when in the Church, and adopt the attitude of the world when dealing with the world! And that sounds good, until we remember the words we read in the Epistle from James: ***“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”*** The word “adulterous” there is a good one to use. Because by trying to have it both ways, we are being unfaithful to God. . . .

There's no way out from this one, is there?

Now, there's nothing wrong with being great, or successful, or really good at something. Jesus doesn't say that here. If God has given you the talents and abilities and successes, thanks be to God! But if you're going to remember one thing today, remember this: when you hear these teachings of Jesus, and it seems as if He is turning things upside-down, realize that what is happening here is not Jesus turning things upside-down – but that He is *actually* turning things right-side up again! It's not Jesus and His teachings that are upside-down, it's our world! A world turned upside-down by sin.

So when Jesus came, He and His teaching looked upside-down because He was the only one right-side-up in an upside-down world! That's why many didn't understand what He was saying. That's why we will never understand what He is saying if we try to reconcile Jesus with the world. Because they *don't*, and they *won't*, fit together. That's why that strong statement in the Epistle is true. To be friends with the world is to be upside-down and opposite of God. Now, not many people would say that this world is a great place, but it's also not a place, a world, that just needs “fixing up” either! It's a world that needs turning “upside-down!” And Jesus has come to turn us around.

And what does that look like? Well, in response to the disciples' curiosity: *Hey Jesus, if you could pick only one disciple, who would it be? . . .* Jesus doesn't pick any of them! He picks a child. For besides Jesus Himself, there was nothing right-side-up in this world to show them, and since Jesus' disciples didn't understand what Jesus and His cross were all about yet, Jesus shows them something they could understand . . . a small child. As if to say: *"This is who I would pick . . . Peter, James, and John, and the rest of you. Because in God's eyes, you don't do great, or achieve great – you are given great. And you are great because you've been chosen; you're not chosen because you're great."*

That's a bit different than what we're used to! But it is the "right-side-up" that enables us to see Jesus and His cross rightly. To see ourselves where we belong (the bottom!), and to see Jesus as the One who wanted us to be the greatest, and so He became the least. The Son of God who came down into an upside-down world to set it right again. And not only by His Words and teachings and miracles, but also by His rejection. His rejection by an upside-down world which showed that He was no friend of this world and the ways of this world, but was instead considered an enemy to be disposed of. . . . But when that happened, when Jesus *was* disposed of by crucifixion, what do we see? We see exactly what He came here to do – we see the world turning upside-down! The sun stopped shining; the earth shook and split open; the dead came out of their graves. When Jesus died, the world got shook-up! Because it got turned upside-down – or really, it got turned back right-side-up! For there on the cross, and then in the resurrection, was the greatest reversal of all – sin was undone, life defeated death, and the grip of Satan was smashed.

And the effects of this great reversal, of Jesus turning the world right-side-up again are still being felt. The effects of the cross are still being felt . . . every time a new child of God is created in the waters of Holy Baptism. Every time we are fed and strengthened to live as His children with His very body and blood. Every time we are turned right-side-up again as we bow our heads before God, confess that we are sinful and upside-down, and are restored again through His forgiveness.

But the effects of the cross are also felt in this world through you. When you live right-side-up as children of God. When you speak His right-side-up Word. When you serve and give and love . . . and when you are rejected for it. When the world considers you crazy, and upside-down.

That's okay. We should expect it, so don't worry about it. Don't worry about being the greatest in the world. Don't worry about being number one. Don't worry about getting stepped on. You've already been chosen, forgiven, and promised all that you need! And so you are now free to serve and love and give – not to right yourself! But because you

have *already* been turned right-side-up by your Saviour, and you're just living the way you are! As a child; a child of God. Already great in the Kingdom of God, and in the eyes of your Heavenly Father.

And in the end, His opinion is the only one that matters anyway! Lists come and lists go. Each year the folks of this world have to prove themselves all over again. What's in one year is out the next. But the Word of the Lord stands forever. The Word of the Lord, once dead, but now risen! The Word of the Lord given to you. His Word which says: you are mine! *My* child. And if you want great, well you just can't get greater than that!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(P.S. Yes, I know "strategorizing" is not a word, but it makes a great rhyme, doesn't it?)