

To Notice, To Wonder, To Imagine  
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Mark 9:30-37  
September 22, 2024  
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The hardest job I ever had was also the one in which I was paid the least. One summer, I worked as a day camp counselor for the Greater Wichita YMCA. I was put in charge of the 6-year-old boys. I call it my summer of studying forensic anthropology.

One of my main jobs was to line up the boys to go to the restroom. I spent most of my time breaking up fights as the boys clamored for position to be first in line. Since part of the expectation for my position was to instill some Christian and ethical virtues in the boys, I decided to apply a Biblical principle to this situation.

After the usual jockeying for position at the front of the line, I announced, "Jesus said, 'The first shall be last and the last shall be first.' So today, the end of the line will go first." The boys all looked at me like I was a creature from Mars. They quickly caught on and started fighting to be at the end of the line. Then I would have the middle of the line go first. I kept them guessing all summer. I am not sure I instilled a single Christian virtue in those six-year-olds, but I gave a lot of business to Wichita's child psychologists.

Whether conscious or unconscious, it seems to be deeply embedded in our DNA that we yearn to be first -  
first in line,  
first in the eyes of others,  
and first as we compare ourselves to others.

In today's Gospel passage from Mark, we learn that the disciples are very human. Jesus predicted the kind of Messiah he will be – not a triumphant one who will conquer their oppressors, but one who will suffer betrayal and death at the hands of humans. The disciples did not understand what he was talking about and they were afraid to ask him to explain it further.

Instead, their human instincts kicked in, and much like the boys lining up in Wichita, they argued over who among them was the greatest. Their values were still based around seeing life as a horse race of who was up and who was down. While they were ashamed to admit to Jesus what they were arguing about among themselves, he knew it and he called them on it.

He did more than that. He turned their arguments upside down. Jesus stopped them, sat them down, and announced, 'Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he brought a little child over, and lifted the child up in their midst.

Notice the pronoun the translator used for the child – it. In that time, children were regarded as non-persons or not-yet persons. They were considered property – possessions of the father in the household. It was a revolutionary thing for Jesus to embrace a child, and to hold up a child as the model for his disciples. He did this in part to emphasize that the new kind of world he was bringing about was all about lifting up the least, the last, and the lowly.

But I wonder if he also did this in part because children have something to offer that we adults often lack – the gift of imagination. Children have a sense of wonder such that they're willing to be courageous rather than cynical. They ask the questions that really cut to the heart of the matter -

Where did God come from?

Where is heaven?

Why are people fighting?

Why are you so busy and not listening?

Jesus was telling the disciples and us that when we take the last place in line, we enter the world of childlike imagination. From that last and lowly position, we have the perfect vantage point to wonder about things, to have the audacity to ask penetrating questions such as -

Is this even the right line to be in?

A couple of weeks ago, the world of sports was turned upside down when Notre Dame, ranked number five in college football, was upset by a small college, the Northern Illinois Huskies. Thomas Haddock, the head coach of Northern Illinois, teared up after the game when he shared how he never stopped believing in his team. The next couple of days his phone never stopped ringing, with calls and texts from celebrities and interview requests.

But it was making one outgoing call that was most important to him. Thomas deeply admired and respected Marcus Freeman, the head coach his team just beat. It was a proud moment for Thomas when Marcus was named the first African-American head coach at Notre Dame. As a fellow African-American coach, Thomas knew what a milestone that was.

Thomas also knew that he was now in a unique position to help Marcus. After the game, he called to check in with Marcus and said, 'Coach, I would like to make you an offer. If you would welcome it and want it, I would like to share my counsel with you on the strengths and vulnerable spots I saw in your team and ways you could shore them up to help you and your team succeed the rest of the season. Regardless, I want you to know that I'm not going to share these insights with any of your opponents.' Marcus immediately said, 'Yes! I would welcome your help! Thank you.'

Thomas had known what it had been like to be the last in line. His team did not win a single game four years ago. He had grown up in a sport where African-American men for a long time were accepted as players, but not as head coaches. His moment at long last arrived to be at the head of the line, the center of the sports world. And his first impulse was to think about his opponent who had been knocked down and offer whatever help he could to give to lift up him up.

That requires empathy.

That requires courage.

That requires imagination.

Back to that summer in Wichita, I finally connected with those 6-year-old boys when I taught them to play chess, a game I loved. As we learned and played together, I began to see the game anew through their fresh eyes. It became exciting to me again as their eyes lit up when their minds made connections. By the end of the summer,

it was *they* who taught me

and it was *they* who lifted me up.

Jesus invites us to lift up the beloved children around us and the beloved child within us. He invites us to take the last place in line, the perfect vantage point - to notice, to wonder, to imagine.

*Amen.*