

**A Sermon for 18th Sunday after Pentecost
September 22, 2024**



**Vi holds the Jesus doll, as Diana looks on,
at Sunday's picnic.**

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[Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)

Mark 9:30-37

In the midst of us

Jesus is trying to get an important concept clear to his followers. They were a little confused about leadership, because their society demonstrated that big powerful folk ran the show, and if they were going to be leaders in Jesus' movement, then maybe they should do that too – be the greatest, run the show. Jesus gave them a major corrective to that thinking, saying, Whoever wants to be first, must be last and servant of all.

We've been trying to internalize that idea ever since, and it is rather counter-intuitive. The church never really managed this reversal. We still try to act it out liturgically. Think about our liturgical processions. Who comes first? Probably the choir, if you have one. Then perhaps various liturgical servers and assistants, and then, at the very end, the priest, or bishop if one is present. The bishop, who is first in the hierarchy, is last in the procession. That idea lasts about five minutes, and then the clergy take over again.

The congregation sits in church, all facing in one direction, toward the worship leader, usually clergy. If this were an airplane, the leader would be the pilot. And the plane goes in only one direction. So where's Jesus' idea of the first must be last?

I think Jesus was remembering the Biblical stories that usually favored the least of these – remember the story of Jacob and Essau? Essau was born first, but Jacob superseded him. Remember King David? He was the youngest of Jesse's sons. Remember Mary's song, the Magnificat, about toppling the mighty from their thrones? Jesus preached it in the sermon of the mount. Maybe we weren't listening.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the church tried to take these ideas of liturgical equality more seriously. Rather than sitting in airplane style, we tried circles. The congregation and all the leaders formed a big circle, and yes, the least might be standing right next to the greatest. When Pat Hannen was here, she promoted ripping out the pews so the seating could be more flexible. We have a remnant of that on Christmas Morning now, when we sit in a big semi-circle and listen to a children's story.

Well, Jesus tried a version of that. He gathered his twelve disciples around him, told them that the first must be last, and vice versa, and then he demonstrated it. He took a child and placed the child among them. In Jesus' society, children were truly the least, more or less ignored until they became adults. But to acknowledge the child among them, the disciples had to see things differently, had to see the world upside down. We are still challenging the world, and ourselves, to see things upside down.

So here we are outside in God's wonderful world, still a little bit in airplane format, but much more egalitarian than usual. We are between the altar, such as it is, and the food! We are here to enjoy a meal and fellowship. And we may even have some children in the midst of us!

But let me challenge us to place Jesus in the midst of us. Here's my Jesus doll, a little beat up, appropriately enough, who comes into the midst of us with gentleness and a message of an upside-down world. Let us take him into the midst of us and internalize his teaching. He pulled off the greatest reversal of all time – he died, but he rose again! He demonstrated the title of our parish: New Life, coming from the midst of us.