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First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, AL  
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The Upside Down  
Mark 9:30-37

The Netflix show *Stranger Things* exploded onto the pop culture scene two years ago. With its acid washed jeans, old school bulb Christmas lights, dungeons and dragons play, and Barb's coke bottle glasses, the show awakened a nostalgia for the 1980's and fleshed out parallel universe theory for a new generation.

Set in Indiana in the early 80's, the show gives viewers more questions than it does answers. When 12 year-old Will Byers disappears and other strange occurrences put the town on edge, Will's three best friends band together to investigate. Spoiler alert: they discover that experiments of a nefarious corporation have opened a secret portal to another dimension: a place they call *the upside down*. The upside down is a parallel universe that looks almost like our world, except it is dark, devoid of people, the air is filled with floating dust, the sky is prone to strange electrical storms, and it's stalked by an evil creature like the demogorgon who keeps breaking out into the real world and causing problems. The scientists think they have the portal to the Upside Down safely contained and well-guarded. The problem is – they don't.

In our scripture this morning, the disciples hear Christ describe what sounds like an alternate universe. First, he predicts his betrayal, death, and resurrection. Then, he tells them the upside down values of the kingdom of God, where last become first, and children are welcomed and valued. In between, the disciples have an argument about who is the greatest. A key feature of Mark's gospel is the messianic secret – Jesus doesn't want people outside his circle of disciples to know who he is. The irony is that he *does* tell his disciples, but they just don't get it – they repeatedly misunderstand his teaching about who he is and his predictions about what is going to happen. This passage is a prime example of the disciples missing the point.

We've talked before about the kind of Messiah Jews had been expecting— a political savior who would overthrow their oppressors with a show of military might. A leader with the power and wealth the world respects. So when the disciples hear Jesus predict his own death and resurrection, they don't understand what he's talking about. Surely he was bound for greatness! Surely he would conquer Rome! Just look at the power present in Christ – great crowds followed him wherever he went because his teaching was brilliant and he could heal the sick with a touch or a word. He was the one they'd been promised, the one they had been waiting for.

But he wasn't the kind of messiah they expected.

Not at all.

He was the kind of messiah who welcomed children with open arms. In Biblical times, in his context, this was very strange. Powerful, important people didn't pay much attention to children. But Jesus did.

Some churches take this directive to heart – they welcome little ones as if they were Christ himself. Some don't. All of us could do better.

This week, Patti posted a list on facebook – rules for children in church. It included suggestions like this:

One. If you find that you're sitting in front of a child and they can't see, lean to the side.

Two. If the children seated behind you are rustling papers, hand them a crayon.

Three. If there is a baby that is crying, offer to take the baby from their parent and walk to the back of the church and rock the child for a while. The parent really needs a break.<sup>1</sup>

and so on. A big contrast to stories of families being asked to leave other churches because their kids were perceived as disruptive during worship.

A year or so ago, we began experimenting with our Faith Formation programs. Patterns of church attendance have changed, and parents have a hard time making it here even for Sunday worship, much less by 9:30 for Sunday School. So we've adapted; we changed our patterns to try to better fit with people's schedules and lifestyles. One thing we've done is added a multi-age class that meets a half hour before worship. We call it PRAYlude. We've experimented with a monthly evening gathering where all ages join for fellowship, learning, and worship – we call it PRAYground. Another change is happening right now in the balcony – Balcony church. Last week, sixteen kids trooped up there to worship more comfortably, at low tables where they color, read, do puzzles and word searches connected to the day's text – all while listening to what's happening in the service. It can be a little noisy, as some of you have noticed. But it's also neat. It means Teagan could come to the front of the balcony to hear her aunt MaryLyn give an update on the Pastor Nominating Committee's work a few weeks ago. It means John Weston has learned the Lord's Prayer. It means they can hear us say, "God is Good."

Part of our mission statement here at First Presbyterian is that in this church, *children are cherished*. It's preceded by the truth that we aspire for FPC to be a place where *All are welcomed and valued*.

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<sup>1</sup> Justice and Peace Consulting, "Rules for children in a worship service," photo posted October 17, 2017 on facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/JusticeandPeaceConsulting/photos/a.1526762247566140/1935081780067516/?type=3&theater>

When Jesus held up that bewildered child as an object lesson for the disciples, he wasn't only saying, "let kids be kids in church and love them even if they're a little messy or noisy." He was saying much more than that.

Kids weren't welcomed or valued in his time. Children had no social standing at all, no economic or political value, and certainly no rights. Kids were property, they were on par with servants. When Jesus says welcoming a child was the same not just as welcoming him, but as welcoming the one who sent him – he's asking, who is most vulnerable? Who is the person you might overlook, ignore, or even avoid? Welcome *them*. Kids were at the bottom of the totem pole, the base of the household hierarchy. By encouraging the disciples to welcome children, Jesus turns their dreams of greatness upside down. This runs counter to everything the disciples thought they knew about who was important, who God would value.

But the world's values are not God's values. Our ways are not God's ways. The kingdom of God is a place that welcomes the least, the lost, and the last. Where the last shall be first, the lost are found, and the least shall be honored guests.

If our church is a place where children are cherished, we must be aware of the realities faced not only by the children in our pews but also the children in our neighborhood. The kids at Phillips. The kids who are sleeping on the floor at First Light. The kids who are with their mamas at the YWCA. The 4000+ in the foster system, the ones who know the inside of family court all too well.

Because in our time, kids are still vulnerable. They are still the least of these. They still don't have much economic or political power. They can also be tremendously courageous and disarmingly honest.

Have you ever seen the Kid President videos? Robby Novak is a kid with brittle bone disease. His uncle was so impressed by his positive attitude in the face of hundreds of broken bones that they started making inspirational clips with Robby as "Kid President" – offering advice to the world, inspiring others to be awesome. One of my favorites is his advice on how to change the world. You might think you need to have a lot of money to change the world he says, or be powerful (like a mayor, or a senator, or a president). But really, you just need to be an ordinary person filled with love, who does something awesome for other people. Next time you feel overwhelmed, he says, remember this: the world is changed by ordinary people. Little people, living out big love.<sup>2</sup>

Little people, living out big love. What would happen if we stopped worrying about power and prestige, and remembered that God comes to us through the ones we least expect, the ones the world overlooks, ignores, or even avoids? What would happen if we were just ordinary people, living out big love for the least, the lost, and the last?

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<sup>2</sup> Kid President, "How to Change the World," SoulPancake, 12/19/13, <https://youtu.be/4z7gDsSKUmU>

In *Stranger Things*, a gang of kids seeks to find out the truth of what's terrorizing their town; they make friends with a girl with psychokinetic abilities, fight the monster, and save the day. But try as they might, the upside down keeps creeping in, breaking into their world.

In the kingdom of God, our values are turned upside down. And the good news for us is that this upside down cannot be safely contained to Sunday mornings, it will not be guarded and closed off. It continues to break into our world in unexpected places, when children are cherished, and all are welcomed and valued; when little people live out big love and do awesome things for one another, it grows ever more powerful in our world. Thanks be to God!