

“Filtered Optics”
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a Mark 9:30-37
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, September 19, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho
Andy Kennaly, Pastor

Is it terrible to be two years old? Maybe you’ve heard that term, “the terrible twos,” but that’s not what I call it. I call it “the terrific twos.” At two years old you find your voice and start to talk. You got walking down, sort of, and like a sponge you absorb the world around you and constantly learn. It’s a phase which moves you toward more independence, away from the vulnerabilities of infancy, and yet you still need others. Three years old I call “two with an attitude.” Lots of energy, language skills getting stronger, more agile bodies, and a determination to try things yourself. “I do it myself!” Yet even three-year olds are still dependent on the adults in their lives to provide nurture, love, and to cover basic needs of belonging, let alone having enough food, clean water, and a place to live.

My three siblings and I grew up in Spokane, Washington. One of our family vehicles that our father drove was a 1968 Ford pickup truck, a big red one with an Alaskan pop-up camper on the back. That tall truck had a distinctive sound, and when he got home from work, you could hear him

coming from over a block away because that low rumble resonated through your body. That truck had a distinctive tone to it.

As little kids, we'd run outside with excitement and yell, "How was it at the office? I said it first!" We tried to be the first one out there. If it was the end of the week and we were heading out for the weekend to camp, he would roll down his window (with a roller) and tell us kids to open the large chain-link gate so he could drive around to the back yard and load the truck with supplies. We'd would open the gate, then run around to the back of the truck, climb up onto the rear bumper and hold the boat rack on top of the camper and pretend we were firefighters riding on the back of a fire engine. He'd drive slowly around on the grass, then we'd hop off and get ready to go camping. I really enjoyed those short hops riding on the back of that truck; it wasn't very far, but for a kid, that's pretty cool!

Last week in the news a bunch of kids ran outside when their dad got home and he honked the horn. His 11-year-old son got in the driver's seat; he got to pull the car in to the driveway. The dad had come home from the aid agency where he worked, and the car was full of water jugs for his family.

The other kids, the boy's siblings and cousins, came outside and stood nearby to watch the 11-year-old get to drive. That's exciting!

The man worked for a United States aid agency based in California and was trying to get his family out of Afghanistan to come to the United States. Somehow the US Military identified him or someone there as an ISIS operative and when he got home, he honked the horn, his 11-year-old son got in the driver's seat, the other kids and their cousins came out to watch, and on August 29th, an American Hellfire Missile incinerated them. A drone operated by "us," the U.S., initiated hellfire.

"Days after amid reports of the children killed, General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called it a "righteous strike." Don't let this terminology slip by. We, the people of the United States, used a missile called Hellfire then call it righteous. Hellfire is righteous? How ironic.

The 37-year-old father who was killed in that U.S. drone strike had worked 15 years for Nutrition & Education International, a California-based non-profit to counter malnutrition in Afghanistan.

Terrific age 2, age 3 with their attitude, age 7, and a variety of other ages including adults, were killed. How was it at the office? Righteous.

Jesus asked them “What were you arguing about?” They were silent. They wanted to be great. Greatness. Empires are proud of their greatness and their vast achievements. Baffling Jesus would say, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Zeremai Ahmadi. This world now has one less doting father, enthusiastic dancer, and optimist with a spirit that even amid the chaos of his surroundings was quick to comfort, using humor. He’d grown up poor and had a heart for the poor.

Now, since the United States has accused their family of association with ISIS, which is an enemy of the Taliban, the remaining family is in danger from their own government following the Taliban’s takeover, not to mention being marked for their past help given to the United States. They are in a catch-22, may God have mercy. Mercy on them, and mercy on us, especially as we expand the use of drones.

<https://www.newsweek.com/afghan-targeted-us-drone-strike-worked-us-non-profit-sought-special-visa-1629536>

Last Tuesday, Sharon and I were there early to set up the Zoom camera for the Book Study Group. Previously, via texting on our cell phones, we decided that we would set up the camera. I thought I was setting it up, she

thought she was setting it up. The texting was there, words digitally communicated, we both saw the same messages, read the same thing. But she interpreted the words one way, I interpreted them another, and both interpretations were valid. In person, when we were both there, with body language, eye contact, voice expression, and the immediacy of being in the same space, we cleared up the miscommunication. The camera got set up and we had our group study.

Optics. Preference of the visual. The “optocentric Western tradition that followed Plato (the ancient Greek philosopher who said sight is the highest virtue): if I see something, I can say what it is. To have knowledge like sight is to know things...” (<https://www.hypocritereader.com/96/place-our-hands>) Anthropos, humans, according to Plato, are called “upward gazers.” We look up, sight is akin to the divine as heaven is viewed as above us. The earthly, the physical, touch, immediacy; these things, as you can see in James this morning, written in this Platonic cultural context, is seen as devilish, unspiritual, the lowest of the senses, not virtuous.

For Jesus to be in the house along with all those disciples gathered in Capernaum, children would not be seen. It was culturally taboo for children

to in that setting. Out of sight, out of mind. Yet Jesus, embodying one of the biggest scandals in Western history, challenges our optics and assumptions of our knowledge. Incarnation is the union of spirit and matter, and not only is this true in the life of Jesus, but the living Christ is in all things, and all things are in Christ. Jesus shares this lesson in a surprising way, one that should not have been possible. Jesus “took a little child and put it among them.” How insulting! How could you dare to treat your houseguests in such a way?! They now could see a child in their midst, even as this important teacher sat among them. He violates their rules!

But he’s not done! He then challenges Western Philosophy itself. The same western optocentric philosophies that have created cultures that view data on screens and assume they have knowledge and the right and power to kill from a distance. The philosophical context we live in, thanks to Plato, and the industries of war and the ability avoid contact, immediacy, and the personal, gets challenged by the very next thing Jesus does. It wasn’t enough to set the child among them, because there’s the word, “and.” Jesus “put it among them, *and* taking it in his arms, he says to them...”

Jesus is now holding a small child, maybe a baby or a toddler. Physical contact, touch, the lowest sense, the worst of the virtues, supposedly, according to Western wisdom that calls the earthly “unspiritual, devilish,” even when trying to be pious and devout and churchy. Jesus holds this child and that’s when he shows them that not only does greatness involve being the last of all and servant of all, but “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Remember I mentioned Christ in all things and all things in Christ? Jesus himself holds in his arms a child and this child is not devilish or unspiritual or lacks virtue, but represents and embodies nothing less than divine presence. Welcome the child, you welcome Jesus, the Living Christ, and you welcome God, the Source of all there is, seen and unseen.

The filtered optics of Empire make it almost impossible to live this Jesus teaching, to have any inkling of what Jesus does as he takes this child, the least of these, into his arms. Our optics fail to allow connection to the scandal of this, culturally; to the personal connection of this, relationally; to the Divine indwelling, the sacredness of immediacy, theologically. What

some call a Christian nation has just sent hellfire and called it righteous to defend the optics of limited knowledge, and apparently church tradition hasn't really helped much for the last 2,000 years to overcome the influence of insidious Greek philosophy.

A little child is not a formed adult. A little child is open, trusting, and curious. Maybe we need a church like that too, a “new expression of church that participates in the evolving story of God told through sacred narratives, wilderness, and our lives. Church is not a building or a set of beliefs, it is a Conversation.” (<http://churchofthewild.com/>), one that's not domesticated by unexamined assumptions.

Jesus was not impressed by their arguments about who was the greatest among them. That was not the identity he was trying to shape in them. By violating assumptions, breaking rules, and dying to anything less than the immediacy of God's Loving Presence, the Christ teaches us that “God calls people throughout history to change their identities, to surrender their small visions and open up to larger ones, to step into their callings to be agents of restoration to a broken and disconnected world.” Better yet, to be healers in a

wounded world, able to show and live to demonstrate creative unity, sacredness, and Love in the eternal now. (<http://churchofthewild.com/>).

Maybe we don't want to see all that because if we do it will change our politics, our economics, our social structures, and our quest for greatness as the most powerful country the world's ever known. Most people won't be interested in this teaching. Most Christians won't be interested in this teaching. That's why Jesus is in a house, teaching disciples, and God's welcome echoes through the ages what true righteousness really is, what deep Wisdom has to teach. In Christ, may we find ways along the edge of our wilderness wandering to see with more than filtered optics as we open our hearts to the real presence of the Risen Christ. And may God be glorified in humble service, NOW, even as forever. Amen.