

Sermon Series: Summer Reading
Sermon: Turning the World Upside Down
Acts 17:1-9

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“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.”

Turning the world upside down, saying there is another king. I wonder if that is what people say about us, about contemporary followers of Jesus, about the Church today? That we're turning the world upside down, threatening the status quo, challenging widely held assumptions about what is and isn't good and right, that we're disturbers of the peace, troublemakers, a threat to the nation, to authority, a challenge to customs and traditions? That's what they were saying about the earliest followers of Jesus. Because they ran around proclaiming that there was/is another king. And this king had been nailed to cross, was raised by God from the dead, now sits at the right hand of the Father, and that all authority on earth and in heaven belongs to him and therefore our ultimate allegiance belongs to him and to him alone. Caesar may claim to be king, but Caesar has no authority that God does not allow. Now that does not mean that God ordains, or condones, or blesses all civil authority. God orders all authority much like a librarian orders the books in a library even though he or she doesn't approve of everything in every book. All governments, including our own, stand under the judgment of God, and we cannot reduce Christian faithfulness to any political, cultural, or social program, since inevitably all of them will fail to fully realize God's justice, grace, and promise.

So, the bottom line is, regardless of where we find ourselves on this planet, there is another king named Jesus whose Kingdom is coming upon this earth. It is a Kingdom that looks quite different from the kingdoms of this world. And those who claim his name, who have been baptized into his life, are now first and foremost citizens of that Kingdom. Our allegiance, our loyalty, our faithfulness belongs to him. He alone has the power to save, to secure the future of this world, and to give life. And if we are citizens of his kingdom then the way we live must be aligned with the way he lived, otherwise, how will the world know to whom we belong?

I have to tell you, more and more this keeps me up at night. This nagging sense that somehow, I've not lived up to that call and I'm complicit in accommodating or domesticating the gospel, in watering down the message of Jesus and nodding to Caesar because quite frankly it makes my life easier. I worry that even if it's unintentional, I'm guilty of turning the gospel upside down in an effort to protect my well-constructed life, rather than allowing the gospel to turn my life upside down and bring my life into alignment with the Kingdom of God. In other words, I ask God to bless my life, rather than helping me live a life that blesses God.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had this same sense of concern about where we find ourselves as Church, as followers of the risen Lord. I shared this with you a few months ago but it is so contemporary. From a Birmingham jail he wrote, “Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were a 'colony of heaven' and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be 'intimidated.'... Things are different now. The contemporary Church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.”¹

How is it that we now find ourselves in the place of sanctioning things as they are, in working to preserve the order of things in a way that benefits us and people like us the most, rather than being perceived as turning the world upside down in the name of Christ? Why do we sometimes think that being Christian, being a follower of Jesus basically means being a good citizen, being nice to others, pursuing personal happiness, saying a blessing at meals, maybe attending church, giving a little, or supporting a particular political agenda?

What does any of that have to do with the one who said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) When was the last time that we did anything that might be perceived as an attempt to turn the world upside down? More and more I'm convinced that the key to the growth, to the renewal and the revival of the Church is not found in having the catchiest music, or the trendiest pastor, or well-executed programs that help people achieve their best life now. The growth, revival and advancement of the Church is directly related to our willingness to take Jesus seriously, to give him our ultimate allegiance, and to allow him to turn us upside down and then use us to turn the world right side up.

Because it's not so much that we're called to turn the world upside down, but to join God in turning an already upside down world, right-side up. It's just that the world doesn't know that it's already standing on its head and so the work of the gospel feels disruptive. But we know that for all its protesting, the world is a broken mess. There is plenty of evidence of that. And it's a mess because it's followed Caesar and traded truth for power, and invested not in the well-being of all of God's people but pursued personal wealth, and because it orders life by fear and not love. As citizens of a very different Kingdom, “We are called to be people of conviction, not conformity; of moral nobility, not social respectability. We are commanded to live differently and according to a higher loyalty. . . . As Christians we must never surrender our supreme loyalty

¹ MLK, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.

to any time-bound custom or earth-bound idea, for at the heart of our universe is a higher reality—God and [God’s] kingdom of love—to which we must conform.”²

Far too many of us have allowed our understanding, or the way we see the world, to be defined by something other than the gospel or someone other than Jesus. We take our clue upon how to see or understand the world, how to describe what is going on, or should be going on, or how we should respond to what we see going on around us from our political party or from our favorite radio personality or television host, or any number of other sources that seek to shape and define our vision.

But a large part of being a follower of Jesus is learning to see the world as he sees it. Adam Hamilton, pastor of Church of the Resurrection says, “I’d like for my congregation to look at the news every day, and think: ‘I wonder how the Gospel calls me to respond to this?’” Can you imagine what a difference this might make? If that was the first thing we asked ourselves the next time we are confronted with some issue facing our nation, our community, or the world? “I wonder how the Gospel calls me to respond?”

To do this means having our lives up-ended, or turned upside-down so that we gain a different and more faithful perspective. Which shouldn’t surprise us because after all we follow the one, “who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness and found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8) In Jesus, in the very Word of God becoming flesh, descending, stooping to our level we see that the Kingdom is just that kind of place, where things are up-ended, turned upside-down, where God becomes human, so that human beings might draw near to God. Jesus teaches us to view the world from the bottom looking up. As Bishop Will Willimon points out the way in which we have ordered the world encourages us “to want to spend our lives on top looking down at the world; not on the bottom looking up.”(Willimon) That perspective encourages the status quo. And that is the order the disciples challenged. Think about it, it’s quite a different perspective on the world from Caesar’s throne, if you look out upon the world from there, versus seeing the world while kneeling beside your friends and washing their feet. And remember, Judas was among those Jesus served.

So, let me think with you for a just moment about what life looks like turned upside down, or right side up, what life can look like when we align ourselves with this other King named Jesus. If Christianity isn’t about simply being a good citizen, being nice to others, pursuing personal

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Transformed Non-Conformist,” *Strength to Love*, 1968, 11.

happiness, saying a blessing at meals, if it is about the radical change that Christ brings when we give him our allegiance then what might that look like?

First, this upside down life with Jesus looks like a Father who had two sons. And one of those sons turned his back on his father, basically wished his father dead, wasted his inheritance, did nothing to deserve his father's love and then crawled home only to find his father waiting to embrace him and forgive him, and welcome him.

The world says get even, get revenge, and settle the score. That's what Caesar would do. But in this upside down Kingdom we encounter life that begins in our being forgiven even though we don't deserve it. And out of that forgiveness, of getting what we don't deserve, flows a life of forgiving others. The world of Caesar is about get what you can when you can, look out for number one, for your closest friends, jealously guard your future, hold on to power and position at all costs.

This upside down life with Jesus looks like the owner of a vineyard of hired servants throughout the day. Some came early and worked all day, others came late and worked only a few hours. All were paid the same. And when some began to complain the owner of the vineyard asked, "Why are you envious because I am generous?" God gave and all creation came into being. God gave and Abraham and Sarah are blessed with descendants. God gave and Moses led the people to freedom. God gave and there was bread from heaven and water to drink – more than enough. God gave and Mary and Joseph had a son who one day gives himself away completely, his life poured out, emptied on the cross. Life in this upside down kingdom is characterized by the extravagant generosity of God. Freely we have received, freely we must give.

You know in Caesar's kingdom there were vast armies, the threat and use of horrific violence, the amassing of enormous amounts of wealth all designed to maintain Caesar's position and power, to secure the Empire. Too often we believe that if we have enough money, or enough power even the threat of force, if we have the right position or relationship then we can secure our future and the future of our families and we will live long, and happy, and prosperous lives.

We sacrifice our lives in all sorts of ways in the name of pursuing life. And we fear anyone or anything we believe is a threat to that life we're making for ourselves. We see it throughout history. And out of that fear we'll go to great lengths to protect ourselves and to secure our future. But in the upside down Kingdom of God, Jesus says, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life, or give their life away, for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39)

Looking at the world from the perspective of Christ and his Kingdom we see all around us signs of a world that is standing on its head. The good news is that in Jesus, God has begun the work of healing, and reconciling, and putting things to right. Where God's Kingdom is breaking in,

where Jesus' people lean into the gospel and follow the one who is their Lord and King we see glimpses of a world being turned upright. So anywhere the poor are blessed, or those who mourn are comforted, anywhere humility and mercy win the day, or where people hunger and thirst for righteousness, anywhere peacemakers are at work there is the right-side up Kingdom of God. And in as much as we seek that Kingdom, in as much as are willing to be poured out for that Kingdom, and follow the other King, whose name is Jesus, we will discover the life that really is life, the peace that passes understanding, and the joy of the Lord. Amen.