

The World Turned Right Side Up

In last week's text, Jesus heads from the banks of the Jordan still dripping with the waters of baptism, with the echo of God's voice ringing in his ears. There God confirms what we knew all along, that Jesus is in fact the Son of God, the Beloved with whom God is well pleased, before Jesus has done anything that the writer of Matthew finds significant enough to write down. Matthew passes over decades of details to bring us to the banks of the Jordan and then on to the wilderness where this Son of God grapples with what that will mean in the face of testing, temptation, and opposition on all sides. Our text for this morning begins at the end of chapter four, after Jesus has called his first disciples to leave their fishing nets and join him in drawing people into the kingdom of heaven instead. [Read Matthew 4:23-5:20]

This passage comes from the text known as the Sermon on the Mount and includes, as we heard, the Beatitudes. Jesus is telling his new disciples in no uncertain terms what this kingdom-come-near looks like. Through Matthew, Jesus is also reminding those who come after, Matthew's immediate community and those who will follow, what it means to be members of and leaders in this kingdom. As you may recall, the gospels are not play-by-play accounts. There is no stenographer standing by and capturing Jesus' every word. The gospel accounts are written down decades after Jesus lived, by those who have heard the stories and are led by the Spirit to write them down so that the community will not forget who they are called to be and what they are called to be about.

Each week, I come up with five words that we print on the blue young worshipers' guides, inviting the children to listen for these words in the scripture or the sermon. The words this week are *blessed*, *imagination*, *topsy turvy*, *kingdom*, and *sermon*. Now the cynic could say I just gave myself a short cut and made sure that all the words are in here, but when we as a gathered community listen to this familiar passage, there are certain words we expect to hear, too, words like *poor*, *meek*, and *peacemakers*. We expect to hear these words even if we're not quite sure what to do with them or with the one who speaks them. Often we hear them and we think, "Yes, yes, I should be meeker, more merciful." We hear it as a "to do" list. But I don't think that's exactly what Jesus has in mind. This is not a check in for the well-intentioned New Year's resolutions we made almost a month ago, but it is a refresher on the kind of community Jesus intends to build in and through the disciples, in and through the church.

Jesus has now made his way out into the larger world, the world dominated by oppression and poverty. In this world the religious leaders have found themselves cozying up with the ways of Rome more than the ways of the God who gives them life. Jesus is born to save a world that in many cases does not believe it needs saving. He insists that the poor

in spirit, those at the end of their rope, are blessed, beloved of God, noticed and treasured in the midst of a world that tells them they are not. He says the same about those who grieve, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. It sounds so idealistic doesn't it? So completely and utterly unheard of. Such proclamation turns everything those in power preach on its head. In their eyes this makes for a topsy turvy world, a world turned upside down. But what if it is less about this Jesus turning things upside down and more about his setting things right, restoring the world to the way God intended it? He does go on to insist that he is not interested in abolishing the Law; he is not beginning from a blank slate. Instead he comes to fulfill the Law, to flesh it out, to enliven it again with life and breath, to show us what the Law was always intended to be, who we as a community are created to be. When the Israelites receive the Law in the wilderness on that other mountain, it is a defining, life-giving moment. The Law is intended to shape the life of the community, to inform how we live with God and one another. Many Jewish leaders of Jesus' day seemed to have lost sight of that, but we have, too. Over the centuries, we have fallen short of this life giving Law, this gift that speaks of honoring our elders and loving God above everything and everyone, telling the truth, and treasuring every living creature. Instead humanity has routinely and repeatedly embraced the topsy turvy way as just the way things are. And it's not just those people out there, those people on the other side of the world or the river or the aisle. The church has taken the topsy turvy bait, too.

This past week we observed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 90th birthday. While much of Dr. King's work is well known, the one piece that we most often revisit is his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." My husband reminded me this week that his letter is actually a response to one sent to him by Birmingham pastors, one of whom was a Presbyterian. They had issued an "Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense" a few months before, and as the marches and non-violent action reached a fever pitch, they called on Dr. King and the other leaders to pull back:

We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.¹

Natural impatience? Racial equality was not and is not simply a matter of "hopes being realized" or a matter of being comfortable or timely or convenient. Instead it is a matter of the topsy turvy world where the color of one's skin makes her lesser-than being turned right side up where it should be.

Dr. King was not all that popular while he was alive. He was deemed an agitator and a trouble maker. But he's in good company. This preacher on the mountain making outlandish claims about who's in the kingdom rankles people, too. He tries to prepare the disciples sitting with him. He tells them that they, too are called to be part of this turning-the-

¹ <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-martin-luther-king/>

world-right-side-up business and that they will face pushback and persecution for doing what he asks and following where he leads. But the Beatitudes are more than lovely poetry to be painted on a Pinterest-worthy sign for my wall. This list, this poetry is Jesus' setting the church's agenda.

As I have mentioned before, I am a great admirer of Homeboy Industries, a ministry begun and led by Father Greg Boyle in California. For decades this ministry has worked with those the topsy turvy world wants nothing to do with: gang members and felons. In his book, *Barking to the Choir*, Boyle mentions a *New Yorker* profile in which the leadership of a church "resigned itself to the fact that 'secular' culture would always be 'hostile' to Christianity."² Boyle takes issue with that claim:

I don't believe this is true. Our culture is hostile only to the inauthentic living of the gospel. It sniffs out hypocrisy everywhere and knows when Christians aren't taking seriously, what Jesus took seriously...Homeboy wants to give rise not only to the idea of redemptive second chances but also to a new model of church as a community of inclusive kinship and tenderness.³

Authentic inclusive community. Kinship and tenderness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the peacemakers...the world turned right side up.

In a video I watched recently, Boyle tells the story of bringing two of the Homies as they call themselves with him to a talk he and they gave at Gonzaga University. Boyle speaks about Mario, one of the Homies who flew for the first time on that trip, and how women pulled their children closer when he walked by with his tattooed arms and neck and eyelids. He speaks about Mario's gentle ways, his kindness as a former gang member who now sells baked goods at the cafe at Homeboy Industries. Boyle says that Mario is perhaps the kindest, gentlest person in all of Homeboy Industries. He says, "[Mario is] proof that only the soul that ventilates the world with tenderness has any chance of changing the world."⁴ And Boyle tells about the moment at the end of the talk when the time for questions from the audience began. A woman directed the first question to Mario who clutched his microphone with fear. She asked him what advice he gives his children who are almost teenagers. Through tears he said that he just did not want them to turn out to be like him. Through tears of her own the woman responded, "Why wouldn't you want your kids to turn out to be like you? You are loving. You are kind. You are gentle. You are wise. I hope your kids turn out to be like you."⁵ The entire audience of one thousand people stands and claps and claps and claps. Boyle says that all Mario could do was hold his head in his hands in

² Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017) 2.

³ Boyle, 2-3.

⁴https://www.facebook.com/dailygoalcast/videos/2239895862965005/UzpfSTEzMzk5NjU5MDk0ODE3ODM6MTYwNjgxODI1NjEyOTg3OQ/?sk=h_chr

⁵https://www.facebook.com/dailygoalcast/videos/2239895862965005/UzpfSTEzMzk5NjU5MDk0ODE3ODM6MTYwNjgxODI1NjEyOTg3OQ/?sk=h_chr

awe and joy that, “This room full of people, strangers had returned him to himself. And they were returned to themselves.”⁶

In that moment, in that space, the world, the topsy turvy world was turned right side up, returned to the way God intended where tears and compassion for strangers rule the day, where the outcast is not only noticed but welcomed like a long lost brother, a world where mercy holds more sway than might, where peacemaking is the primary work, where the meek and humble are put in charge. That is the world God envisions; that is the ministry Jesus is preparing his disciples to carry out; that is the mission he still calls us to today. Yes, the world is topsy turvy, but that does not give us an excuse to shrug and accept things as they are. In fact I believe we are called to do the very opposite.

Father Greg ends his speech with a charge:

I think you go from here to stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. And you stand with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. And you stand with those whose dignity has been denied. And you stand with those whose burdens are more than they can bear. And you stand with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. And you make those voices heard.⁷

“You are the salt of the world,” Jesus tells us. “You are the light of the world,” he insists. Salt and light. You and me. We have a job to do. We do not get to shrug the world off or wash our hands of it or walk away from it. Because God in Christ does not shrug us off or wash his hands of us, nor does he walk away, no matter how many times he would have good reason to do so. So if we want to claim the name of the One who claims us, it is time to move back into this topsy turvy world and continue Christ’s holy work of turning things right side up.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶https://www.facebook.com/dailygoalcast/videos/2239895862965005/UzpfSTeZMzk5NjU5MDk0ODE3ODM6MTYwNjgxODI1NjEyOTg3OQ/?sk=h_chr

⁷https://www.facebook.com/dailygoalcast/videos/2239895862965005/UzpfSTeZMzk5NjU5MDk0ODE3ODM6MTYwNjgxODI1NjEyOTg3OQ/?sk=h_chr