

Turning the World Right Side Up Again

Will you pray with me please?

Most gracious and holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, the world certainly has been turned upside down. It was only nine months ago I thanked you for your loyal support to the ministry of Parity right there in the chancel of Leonia's sanctuary.

COVID-19 had cast a spotlight on all the flaws and disparities and inequities contained in the societies of the world. Governmental responses in many cases have been and continue to be woefully inadequate. Individual responses have ranged from wonderful and courageous examples of neighbors helping neighbors to acts of selfishness that range from inexcusable to insane.

So in this crazy world we're now living in, what has this morning's scriptures to say to us?

Like the good seminary-trained preacher I am, I've boiled it down to three points:

- 1) Even all this mess, God has not left us to fend for ourselves.
- 2) Even the tiniest things we do have the potential for greatness.
- 3) With the right point of view we can be unstoppable.

Let's dig in.

- 1) Even all this mess, God has not left us to fend for ourselves.

In the Romans 8:26-28 we're told the Spirit helps us in our weakness and that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purposes. All things. Think about that for a moment in our present context. Think of the things that are happening today that never in your wildest dreams could you imagine working for good. Our limited points of view make us weak and -- like the five blind men clutching to their limited understanding of what an elephant is like -- we clutch to what we say life must be and must remain like because that's how it's always been. We can only see what we've always seen. We're unwilling to experience life in a new way. Like with the pictures I shared during the children's time: that's not a bird. That's a bunny. No, that's not a bunny that's a bird. God has given us a Spirit that transcends our fears and our experiences, so that we can see both the bird and the bunny, so we can see things the way they were and how they need to be now and have the assurance that God is present in the places we don't understand, in the places where we're relying on fear instead of courage, suspicion instead of trust. If we're living according to God's purposes, the things we fear, the people we distrust won't have the power over us that our fears and distrust give them. Verses 29-30 are loaded with a lot of baggage because theologians with different points of view have reflected and argued about just what terms like foreknew and predestined and justified mean and just who they apply to. For me, it's like the blind men arguing what an elephant looks

like. Each has a piece of the truth, but none has the whole truth. Delving into that is a whole other sermon on its own. What really matters in the words of verse 28: all things work to good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose.

But what does it mean to be called according to God's purposes? What does it mean to live as God would have us live? Well, Jesus told us that didn't he? It's to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. On these two commandments rest the whole law. If we're loving God with everything we've got – no holding back – and loving our neighbors as ourselves we can do great things because it's then that we're connected to the power that comes from God's kingdom. And connected to that power...

2) Even the tiniest things we do have the potential for greatness.

The verses in Matthew show how. In verse 31 and 32 we're told the power of the kingdom starts tiny – no bigger than a mustard seed that is no bigger than the period of a typed sentence. Yet that tiny thing grows into a tree so large all the birds on earth can find a home there. It's like a little lump of yeast that enables dough to rise into a loaf that can feed an entire family. My smile or my helping hand or my prayers or my donations or my signature on petitions may seem tiny compared to all that's going on right now, but empowered by the power of the Kingdom those tiny selfless acts yield great results.

Upon seeing what goodness flows from the kingdom, people shift their values, reexamine their lives and make different choices. That's what verses 44-46 are telling us. Being touched by the power of the kingdom is so wonderful two different men gave all they had to be part of it. You see it all comes back to point of view. When you're touched by the power of the kingdom it doesn't matter whether you see the bird or the bunny. What matters is that you're in line with loving God with all your heart, mind and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself.

The kingdom isn't exclusive. Verse 47 tells us it's so wide it's like a net that catches fish of every kind. The kingdom is available to everyone. Everyone is attracted to it. Everyone wants to see what it's all about. But unlike the two men in verse 44-46, not everyone wants to be a part of it. Not everyone is willing to shift their point of view and can't be part of the kingdom. If you're bound and determined to see a bird and refuse to see how you can also see a bunny, you're too close minded, too far away from loving God and neighbor to fit in. Verses 49-52 are bitter pills to swallow, because we want everyone to fit in, we want everyone to belong. But if you can't love your neighbor as yourself, there is no place in the kingdom for you.

That's a big ouch. So given that some people can look at the same image and see a bird or a bunny, is there a right point of view and a wrong point of view? I'd say that's the wrong way to ask the question. For me the right way is this: does your point of view reflect the love for God and the love for neighbor on which Jesus says the whole law depends? If yes, then whether you see a bird or seeing a bunny doesn't matter. If you're called according to God's purposes, that is if you're motivated by the love for God and for neighbor you'll have a point of view that makes you unstoppable. Why? Because God loves you just as much as you love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

The last verses of the Romans scripture tells us so:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There's a confidence that comes from being connected to the power of the kingdom.

3) With the right point of view we can be unstoppable.

But now, full of that confidence and courage, we must remember to humble ourselves lest we like Adam and Eve fall into the original sin of wanting be like God.

The inequities and injustices that have been and are being brought to light because of COVID-19 aren't only a matter of understanding how people can see the same thing differently. Acknowledging that reality is only step number one of a four step process. Step number two is asking ourselves honestly, "How does my understanding, how does my point of view measure up to loving God wholeheartedly, to loving my neighbor as myself?" Then comes step number three: being honest and admitting when that understanding, when that point of view is out of line with loving God with all we've got and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Finally, we have to take step four: when we see and admit we're out of line, do all we can to get back in line.

My prayer for us all is that we read today's scriptures with one end in mind: we commit to take these steps.