

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Matthew 5: 1-12

July 12, 2009

(Ordinary Time)

Consider your own call, my sisters and brothers: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. [For] He is the Source of your life in Christ Jesus.

Or as Paul said in his second letter to the church at Corinth, **We have this treasure in earthen vessels -- in old clay pots -- that it might be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us.**

Things are not always as they appear, are they?

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An old fellow not too far from here, I think, learned that the hard way, one day, when his four-year-old grandson was there for a visit. It was a beautiful day. A Sunday afternoon. And it was sunny and warm ... just a gorgeous day. So he grabbed the Sunday paper, of course, and a cup of fresh-brewed coffee. He went out on the deck, plopped down in one of the rocking chairs they bought at the Cracker Barrel store, and just went at it. Rocking and reading and laughing at Beetle Bailey on this beautiful day, when all of a sudden he noticed he wasn't alone. Little Johnny, his grandson ... who was only four at the time ... was standing beside him holding out his hand. And in his hand he was a big fuzzy peach. "Persian Apples" the Romans called them. Perfect for cobblers and pies and a big old dollop of vanilla ice cream ... or just the way God made them, straight from the tree. And there it was all ripe and juicy in the little boy's hand. And he held it out to his grandpa. And as he did, the boy mumbled something that he didn't quite hear.

The old man took the peach from little Johnny. And as he did he thought, “I am blessed. I am truly blessed. The weather is warm, the sun’s shining bright, and I am loved by this sweet little boy.” And so he took the peach and he ate it, as he turned to the sports section of the Sunday paper. And as he turned the page, he noticed that the child was still there. And he had one of those sad little-boy looks on his face. And just as his grandpa swallowed the very last bite, the child looked up with tears in his eyes. And he said, “Grandpa, I didn’t want you to eat it. I just wanted you to get the worm out!”

Remember... **We have this treasure in earthen vessels -- in old clay pots -- that it might be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us.**

Things are not always as they appear ... which can be a bit hard to swallow at times (or even harder to keep down!). But it’s true. We don’t always see things as they really are.

My cousin Michael and I learned that when we were not too much older than that little boy with the peach. And not much taller, I would imagine. We were short ... Michael and I ... even for little boys. And when you’re short, I mean really short, everything else in the world looks awfully tall. I mean, that’s all there is to it. The world was made for people who were a good bit taller than us -- two skinny, scrawny little boys, built low to the ground. Which is where we lived. We were surrounded by table legs and drawer knobs and knees ... lots and lots of knees. So as far as we were concerned tall was just kind of boring, I guess.

So sometimes we would try to cut things down to size by standing on our heads. And when we did, of course -- well, everything looked different. Like stepping into a whole new world. And the grass in the yard was kind of like a fringe hanging down over our eyes, as if we had long green eyebrows. And all the trees grew down instead of up. And the sky was like a big, blue lawn. And we’d move our feet back and forth like somebody walking. And we’d look down (or up,

whichever it was) and watch ourselves walk across the sky. Until we lost our balance. And we'd stand there on our heads and watch the birds fly under our feet. And when we did this my grandma's house always looked different ... like it was just barely hanging on and, at any moment, fall down on one of those clouds.

It all looked so different. And it was exciting, in a way, to think that the trees were really growing down instead of up ... like stalactites in a cave. Or that a building could fall from its foundation into the sky and just barely miss an airplane. And, to me, the most amazing thing was that BB the dog could walk around upside down like a fly on the ceiling. I mean, *anything* could happen in that kind of world. Anything was possible. And *everything* looked different.

But ... it wasn't always better, believe me. Because one day, my cousin Michael and I were out past the barn there in the pasture. The cow field we called it. And we saw some of my great uncles cows just walking around being cows, I suppose. And my cousin

who lived in the city (in New Orleans, where our youth will be in a little while) didn't know a whole lot about farm animals and barnyards and cows and the like. But he was eager to learn. And at first he thought it would be kind of neat to ride one of them. Just hop on its back and go once around the barn. But I told him we couldn't -- that you can't ride a cow. (Though I learned later on, of course, that a certain young lady named Ann-something had done just that when she was a girl.)

So then he thought it might be interesting to see what a cow looked like upside down. So right then and there, this city boy from New Orleans put his head down on the ground. At least, he *thought* that's what he was doing. But that wasn't dirt, believe me it wasn't. And it wasn't shampoo. He found that out in a hurry. And after that everything seemed different somehow, at least to my cousin. People seemed distant and farther away. (Until after he'd had a good long bath with lots of soap.) And for some reason, he

kind of lost interest in seeing the world from that point of view. (Or that point of pew!)

So it's true, you see. Things are not always as they appear. When the world's upside down everything looks different.

It reminds me of two other boys who did a few years ago. They didn't stand on their heads, they broke into a store -- a department store somewhere in Philadelphia, I think. But they didn't steal anything, mind you, or even vandalize the place. Instead, they went through the store and switched all the price tags. They took the tags from cheap things like mops and brooms and waste paper baskets and switched them with the tags from the washers and dryers and big screen TVs. Did that all over the store, these two. Stuffed animals ended up with price tags that came from diamond rings and expensive gold watches. And fur coats were tagged with the tags from the ironing board covers and dish clothes and such.

And so, the next morning, these two young boys just stood back and watched and waited to see what would happen. And when the store opened for business that morning, it was chaos, just chaos in there. People were confused. Some of them were shocked and angry. And others just couldn't believe it. They'd never seen such prices. Not even at flea markets, mind you. For things that should have been cheap were really high-priced. And things of great value seemed nearly worthless, according to the price tags, that morning. I mean, it was almost as if these two young boys had turned the world upside down and made it stand on its head. Because everything looked so different, now. It was all upside down. Just the opposite of what it should have been, or of what made sense.

Isn't that what Jesus was saying in the fifth chapter of Matthew? It's as if he was saying, "Who switched the price tags? Who turned it all upside down?" For, in those days, things that were cheap and worthless,

things of little real value were treasured. And things of great value were thought to be worthless.

But remember ... things are not always as they appear. For as Paul says, **Consider your own call, my sisters and brothers: not many of you were wise... not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are nothing, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. [Because] He is the Source of your life in Christ Jesus.**

So it's true ... **We have this treasure in earthen vessels** [not silver or gold, mind you, but old clay pots] **so that it might be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.**

So if you want to see things as they really are, you'll have to stand on your head. Or better yet, try to see

the world as God sees it, says Jesus. Because he's the only one who really knows which way is up.

Now, I know that's not what it says there in the bible, exactly. But I think that's what it means. Because Jesus went up on the mountain that day -- up on the hillside -- and he looked out over the crowd that had gathered. And he said, **"You are blessed. You are SO BLESSED. You have no idea ... I mean, YOU are SOMEBODY. You're the SALT of the earth, the LIGHT of the world. And if the Kingdom of God a who's who list... you would be on it,"** he said.

And the thing that gets me is ... HE HAD IT ALL UPSIDE DOWN! Because he wasn't speaking to an assembly of political leaders, or prophets or priests. He wasn't even talking to people with money or might or wisdom and wealth. He was talking to people. Just plain old people. Common, everyday, ordinary people. The kind who look in the mirror every morning and see someone who's kind of a nobody, really, staring back at them. People who feel small and weak and

unworthy at times -- who never seem to be able to come out on top in this life.

You are so blessed, he said. **You just don't know. It isn't the rich, or the strong, or the powerful people in this world who make such a difference,** he said. **It's you. You who are hurting and humble and mournful and meek ... who are poor in spirit and pure in heart. You're the ones who are blessed. You are the ones who will come out on top.**

It's enough to make you think he was standing on his head, seeing it all upside down. Because the meek and the mournful and people who are despised and rejected and falsely accused in this world are *anything* but blessed. They might even be cursed. Isn't that what we'd say? The poor souls should be pitied. They're losers. They're rejects. They're the people at the bottom who just can't seem to get anywhere in life. So why should *they* rejoice? Or be happy? Why in the world would *those* people feel blessed? He's got it all backwards. It's all upside down. I mean, they're

what *our* world would call victims, dreamers, pushovers, fools ... *anything* but blessed.

And yet, Jesus stood on there looking into the faces of people who were broken and bruised and belittled by the world. And he said, **The world's got it all wrong. It's not like that at all. Look again,** he said, **You are chosen ones. You are the blessed. You are the ones who'll see God face to face. And you are the ones who will come out on top. Not because you're successful. Not because you're a winner. Not because you're on top. But because being on top is the farthest thing from your minds. You are the ones who can make a difference,** he said, **because your hearts and your hands are open to God and to the people around you....**

And so, these plain old, everyday, ordinary people are the ones who can turn the whole world upside down -- not with their wealth and their wisdom, and not by their power -- but with the gifts of their love and their faith. They are the ones who can help us see God.

I have to tell you, when I think of the blessed -- the who's who of the Kingdom -- I think of my grandma, my mother's mother. A simple, common, extraordinary woman who helped me (more than anyone I've ever know) see that God loves me, too. And I think of a Sunday School teacher named Marjo who brought the bible to life in the stories she told us. And I think of Adam -- a man who was blind but helped others (and helped me) see that our God is a God who loves everyday people.

And that's what they were. They were everyday people. They weren't prophets or priests or scholars or kings. They were common, everyday people like you and like me. Earthen vessels, Paul called them. Old clay pots who were fragile and flawed. And yet there was great treasure inside them. **For they loved and they cared for the people around them. And they let their lights shine so that others could see.** And that makes a difference -- the kind of difference this world really needs.

A few years ago at the Special Olympics in Seattle, nine contestants, nine athletes, took their places at the starting blocks for the hundred-yard dash. And all of them were what we mistakenly call disabled, I think -- some of them physically and some mentally. They all lined up for the hundred-yard dash, a race they'd been waiting for and training for months. And then the gun went off and they all started out not in a dash exactly, but all of them eager to run and to win. All of them but one. One of them stumbles and fell on the track. He tumbled over a couple of times and then he started to cry.

And the others heard him crying ... all eight of them. And when they did, they all slowed down and then they stopped. And they turned around and went back to the one who had fallen. Every one of them. And one of the girls, a young woman with Down's Syndrome, stooped down beside him and she kissed him and said, "This will make it better." And then the others helped him to his feet, and they linked arms. And they walked together to the finish line. It was an upside down kind

of race. But that day they stood the world on its head. And the people in the stands cheered for more than ten minutes. Ten full minutes, mind you. For those nine young athletes and let them see the world as stood the world on its head and let them see the world as God sees it.

Consider your own call, my sisters and brothers: not many of you were wise... not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish *in the world* to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are nothing, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. [Because] He is the Source of your life in Christ Jesus.

Or as it says in Paul's Second Letter to the Church at Corinth, **We have this treasure in earthen vessels -- in old clay pots -- that it might be clear that this extraordinary power, this amazing love comes from God and not from us.**

And so God calls you today to plant your feet down in heaven and see the world right-side up -- right from the heart, and now in your heart that you really are blessed.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, OblSB

