

Turning the World Upside Down

Isaiah 40: 21-31; Acts 17:1-9

Whitefish UMC

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- † What could you do with these items: 1 box 3” concrete anchors; 1 box wood screws; 1 box nails; 12 angle brackets; 1 roll duct tape; 1 roll double-sided tape; 1 roll fishing line; 1 pound Magic Pixi Dust; 7 12 foot 2x4’s; 2 boxes ceiling tiles; 1 roll carpet; 1 quart white paint; 1 quart spackle?
- † A group of students at Brandeis University (with apparently too much time on their hands) decided to turn the dorm room of their alleged friend upside down. That meant everything—bed, chair, workstation, pictures, lamps, closet, ceiling tiles, even his underpants.
- † It was a masterful job, really. There’s a five minute video of their efforts on YouTube, including the reaction of their friend, who was stunned but appreciative of their expert and realistic accomplishment.
- † You could say that this young man’s world was turned upside down while he was away on spring break. But I’m pretty sure that’s not what Luke meant when he told the story of Paul and Silas and Jason in Thessalonica that we just heard.
- † You’ve heard that expression—turning the world upside down—in a number of contexts. It can mean that something spectacularly wonderful is happening, as in: “She turned his world upside down when they fell in love.”
- † Or it can mean something tragic and terrible has happened, as in: “His world was turned upside down by the death of his mother.” It

- can also mean that the usual way of doing things is reversed; that the order of the ways things have always been is turned on its head.
- † Of course whether you view the world being turned upside down as a positive or a negative event is determined by your perspective and your position in the usual order of things. For the young Brandeis student whose dorm room was upside down, it was a proverbial pain in the neck, even though he appreciated the skill of his friends.
 - † For some of the Jewish people of the synagogue in Thessalonica, along with devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women, the upside down gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul preached to them was indeed good news. For others, not so.
 - † What would have compelled some of those in Thessalonica to accept the upside down kingdom of Jesus, while others were so threatened by it that they rose up in violence to attack it and those who proclaimed it?
 - † The components of the world reversing gospel were clear: the healing of the sick; the freeing of those oppressed for their status, gender, wealth, or religion; the forgiveness of sins; the feeding of the hungry; the care for the poor; the inclusion of the outcasts.
 - † It would be tempting to say that those in power didn't like the upside down gospel of Jesus, and those who didn't have power under the old ways did accept Jesus as the Messiah and the way of life that conformed to Jesus' example. But it wasn't that simple.
 - † For Luke, writing in Acts, says that some of the Jews of the synagogue did welcome the teaching of Paul's good news, along with devout Greeks (who probably would have been people of some means), along with not a few of the leading women.

- † Isn't that last phrase wonderful? Who were these leading women? Most likely they were wealthy widows of Roman citizens. Wealthy Roman citizens often married women much younger than they, and so when the men died, the women were able to inherit considerable sums. That gave them more independence than many women, and the early church attracted these leading women in considerable numbers.
- † And lest we demonize the members of the synagogue who roughed up Jason as ignorant trolls, let's remember that they may have thought they were just defending their way of life, their faith. Even though they may have been intrigued by Paul's teachings, it was simply too much change all at once. It turned their world upside down!
- † Last Sunday, while Bob and Alita led an excellent worship service here in our church, twelve hundred leaders of the United Methodist Church celebrated a closing worship service in a hotel ballroom in Jacksonville, Florida. Thankful to be included in the gathering, I joined others in committing to turning the world upside down with the good news of Jesus Christ.
- † At our General Conference in 2008, the United Methodist church, recognizing the fractured nature of its many programs and ministries, decided to unite in four areas of focus for the coming four years.
- † Here they are: 1) developing leaders; creating places for new people; eliminating poverty; improving health globally. (*elaborate*)
- † Given the enormity of the task, these goals can feel overwhelming, almost laughable. How is it possible for the church, even with its many but declining members, to realize these dreams? Each annual conference sent its clergy and lay leaders to learn, share, and

implement strategies to turn the world upside down by living in the way of Jesus.

- † We experienced amazing worship, wonderful music, helpful workshops, and holy conferencing at its best (and also worst.) Above all, we learned that perhaps our vision has been too small, and that with God all things are indeed possible.
- † If you were to ask me to name the most important thing I learned in Jacksonville, it is this: do what you do out of love, not duty. Guilt and fear in the long run will not move the world or even move me. Love will.
- † Does that mean that if we love as Jesus loved, everything will be easy? Far from it. There are times when we have to do things we don't feel like doing, be someone we don't feel like being. How is that possible?
- † When we follow Jesus' ministry, as well as the life of his followers, Paul and Silas, we find three sources of strength. When Jesus began his ministry, those years that would include family rejection, hostility from every power that was, desertion by his closest friends and finally a scandalous death, he first went down to the River Jordan for baptism.
- † Its meaning cut in several directions, but one particular vector of this old and venerable Jewish ritual predominated that day. Mark embodies this meaning in the form of a dove descending that day. Jesus came searching for the strengthening presence of God because he knew he was going to need it.
- † It's almost as if he could hear the scriptures from Isaiah 40 in his head and heart: "Those that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;

they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall walk and not be weary; they shall run and not faint.”

- † So this source of strength is vertical—coming from the heavens and descending like a dove. The second source comes from the disciples he finds to companion him on his journeys. There’s the horizontal dimension, then—the human presence of those who will walk with him, at least most of the way.
- † But he derived his strength from one more source in those early days of his ministry and beyond. He went into the desert, alone, and was tempted there. The devil offered all sorts of power to Jesus, if only he would give his inner core to self-glory.
- † But Jesus turned inward to find his focus and resolve instead. He had to rely on it when he became discouraged, angry, frustrated, or abandoned. What was that inward identity for Jesus? I think it was a core of love—the love Jesus talked about of God, self, and neighbor.
- † We need these three sources of strength, too. We need them when desires of the moment pull us off course. We need them when anger tempts you to forget who you have chosen to be. We need them when a momentary hunger of some kind, or some frustration, or any feelings of the moment collide with our commitments.
- † We’re coming up on the birthday of Abraham Lincoln this week. By now you have probably heard of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book about Lincoln and his cabinet called *Team of Rivals*. Although it was written three years ago, it’s back on the New York Times bestseller list.
- † Lincoln was a man of faith, not conventional or orthodox, but deep faith. He was also vulnerable to bouts of deep depression. A

melancholy besieged him throughout his presidency. Again and again, Lincoln simply didn't feel like doing what he knew he had to do.

- † He didn't relish facing days he knew would be full of conflict and sadness and criticism, and plain old exhausting work. But he turned in all three directions for the strength that he needed.
- † Lincoln turned upward to God, writing "I have been driven to my knees many times in prayer because I had no where else to turn." And he turned horizontally to others. That's mostly what Goodwin's book is about, that contentious cabinet of advisors that Lincoln knew he needed but didn't particularly get along with.
- † And Lincoln also turned inward. He had willed a core purpose in life. You can find that purpose most cogently summed up in his second inaugural address: *With malice toward non; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.*
- † Of course there were times when Lincoln faltered in his feelings and faith and temptations. But he longed for a world turned upside down from the one that led to and staggered through the Civil War.
- † His dream, his vision, was great and no doubt overwhelmed him at times. Our dream, our vision is great, too. And it can feel overwhelming.

- † But when we, following Jesus, learning the lessons of President Lincoln, rely on those three vectors of strength, we, too, can live with hope and expectation of a world turned upside down.
- † So, this day and in the days ahead, practice a cruciform shape of living: seek strength from the presence of God; find companions to walk the road with you; and nurture in your center a core of love and purpose.
- † Above all, act from love, not fear, or duty, or guilt. It's the only enduring motivator. Jesus knew that.
- † And remember, love is not just a feeling, but a decision, a commitment, a life.
- † Amen.

Sources:

Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," <http://en.wikipedia.org>

Michael Lindvall, "When You Just Can't," Brick Presbyterian Church, February 5, 2006.

Operation rellim, <http://humor.about.com>