

“Topsy-Turvy Kingdom”

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22nd Sun./Pentecost
Revelation 21:9-17, 22-27
Mark 10:35-45

Let us pray... O God,
It seems like the world is being upended these days
 where the rule of law is questioned, where lies and violence prevail.
Yet you call us to a ‘topsy-turvy kingdom’
 where right-side up is that the first are last, the last are first;
 the leader serves; the hero is “the victim” who prevails;
 and the seed dies to rise again as a great tree.

Amen

Our “Widening the Welcome” series began with a performance of
 “The Faith Club” with a good attendance from outside of our church.
We hope to present this interfaith classic every year
 so that the message of cooperation and compassion can be heard
 by as many people in our area who have ears to hear.
The series continues tomorrow with a presentation on
 “Truths & Myths of Hospice” with the goal of helping us
 to engage any questions on this perennial topic of mortality.

This series is a project of our Diaconate – who are responsible for
 worship, spiritual life, and education of our congregation.
We borrowed the title of “Widening The Welcome”
 from the UCC’s WISE initiative –
 Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged for Mental Health.
Not directly related to the issue of mental health –
 but in keeping with mentally and spiritually healthy themes,
 we have also included such programs as
 “The Gospel According to Women”, sharing favorite books,
 The Rev. Sarah Lund’s work on “Blessed Are The Crazy”,
 as well as a discussion about what images of Jesus Christ inspire you,
 and the joy of sacred music *in these times*.

‘In these times’ – that is a phrase that stays with me from a sermon given by
 Pastor Shelly Ann Wilson of the United Church of Gainesville
 who preached in the opening worship
 for the UCC FL Conference annual meeting.
Without being specific, it was clear that she was speaking
 to the underlying concern, frustration, and fear of living ‘in these times’...
A friend recently asked me, ‘What bewilders you?’
 and I would add, ‘in these times’...
It seems like everything is coming into question – even at risk of falling apart
 and everybody is looking ahead to the next two and a half weeks.

Willard, p.2

I had hoped that we would have hosted a guest panel discussion
in our Widening The Welcome series to speak on the subject of
“How to talk about Guns in Schools”.

That would have included a gun rights expert, a Congressional candidate,
a State Senator, a local principal, and a student from the Charter School.

However, I think it was too close to the elections –
therefore, too sensitive a topic, so it never quite came together.

It would have been a good addition to these ‘Widening The Welcome’ themes
which are proactive ways to address the toxicity, incivility,
and random violence ‘in these times’...

It has been my goal with you that you recognize that –
for us as Christians and for all people of goodwill,
there is an underlying reality that defies
our outward circumstances of success or failure.

It is a relationship that *we* call the Body of Christ, God’s Kingdom of Heaven,
the Beloved Community...

This is not about individual piety alone – not “I got mine” salvation,
but implies a responsibility to work for integration and transformation
to a ‘topsy turvy kingdom’ –

where the first are last, the last are first; the leader serves;
the hero is “the victim”; the seed dies to rise again as a great tree.

Hear now, the Gospel according to Mark 10:35-45...

Willard, p.3

Mark 10:35-45 [CEV]

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus and asked,

“Teacher, will you do us a favor?”

36 Jesus asked them what they wanted,

37 and they answered,

“When you come into your glory, please let one of us sit
at your right side and the other at your left.”

38 Jesus told them,

“You don’t really know what you’re asking!

Are you able to drink from the cup that I must soon drink from
or be baptized as I must be baptized?”

39 “Yes, we are!” James and John answered.

Then Jesus replied,

“You certainly will drink from the cup from which I must drink.

And you will be baptized just as I must!

40 But it isn’t for me to say who will sit at my right side and at my left.

That is for God to decide.”

41 When the ten other disciples heard this,

they were angry with James and John.

42 But Jesus called the disciples together and said:

You know that those foreigners who call themselves kings

like to order their people around.

And their great leaders have full power over the people they rule.

43 But don’t act like them.

If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others.

44 And if you want to be first, you must be everyone’s slave.

45 The Son of Man [The True Heir of Humanity]

did not come to be a slave master,

but a slave who will give his life to rescue many people.

Willard, p.4

There are three parts to this text:

1. James and John ask to sit on either side of Jesus in his 'Kingdom' – and assume positions of authority in glory.
2. Jesus challenges them about what they think this means – then asks if they can handle his 'cup' and his 'baptism'.
3. The other disciples are jealous – but Jesus explains to them all that the leader in his 'topsy-turvy kingdom', must be a servant.

Last week's lesson from Isaiah 53:2-12 speaks to this inverted way of thinking about Jesus as a Suffering Servant ultimately vindicated to be the leader.

A number of people in the congregation were amazed to hear how closely this text from the 6th C. BCE followed the story of Christ.

It was that old name, blame, shame game that happens all the time – something we do all the time until... we recognize this and start driving out the evil spirits of fear, deception, and hatred by speaking the truth while forgiving and loving others like Jesus. That is what it means to be a Christian and a true human being.

Another text that gives a clue about what it means to be a servant like Jesus is Luke 10:17-20 when the 72 return from their first missionary journey, filled with their own stories of healing and driving out evil spirits. Jesus declares that he saw Satan being thrown down from Heaven, He said this because now the disciples were able to do what he had been doing: proclaiming the good news of God's beloved community to forgive and heal and drive out evil spirits with truth and love.

I believe we are seeing truth emerge amidst the pandemonium, as women's issues are recognized as human issues, and that our top priority must be the next generation and their need for domestic & public safety to grow up in, and that water is life – or death, for us if we don't do our part to protect the environment.

As the Sermon on The Mount in Matthew 5-7, teaches us it is The Golden Rule in play with Cause & Effect – or else...

There is fear about the future and what can be done about what may happen? Perhaps nothing can be done about it – So what then?

Matthew 24:1-14 teaches that we are to love anyway as the strategy for building up a topsy-turvy beloved community:

Where the next generation is our top priority;

Where the first are last and the last are first;

The leader is the servant; The hero survives "victimization";

and the seed dies to rise again as a great tree to shelter all.

Amen

Our lesson today from Revelation 21:9-17, 22-27 is a vision of a transformed world in terms of a magnificent city...

- ⁹I saw one of the seven angels
who had the bowls filled with the seven last terrible troubles.
The angel came to me and said,
“Come on! I will show you the one who will be
the bride and wife of the Lamb.”
- ¹⁰Then with the help of the Spirit,
he took me to the top of a very high mountain.
There he showed me the holy city of Jerusalem
coming down from God in heaven.
- ¹¹The glory of God made the city bright.
It was dazzling and crystal clear like a precious jasper stone.
- ¹²The city had a high and thick wall with twelve gates,
and each one of them was guarded by an angel.
On each of the gates was written the name
of one of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- ¹³Three of these gates were on the east, three were on the north,
three more were on the south, and the other three were on the west.
- ¹⁴The city was built on twelve foundation stones.
On each of the stones was written
the name of one of the Lamb’s twelve apostles.
- ¹⁵The angel who spoke to me had a gold measuring stick
to measure the city and its gates and its walls.
- ¹⁶The city was shaped like a cube,
because it was just as high as it was wide.
When the angel measured the city, it was about fifteen hundred miles high
and fifteen hundred miles wide.
- ¹⁷Then the angel measured the wall,
and by our measurements it was about two hundred sixteen feet high.
- ²²I did not see a temple there.
The Lord God All-Powerful and the Lamb were its temple.
- ²³And the city did not need the sun or the moon.
The glory of God was shining on it, and the Lamb was its light.
- ²⁴Nations will walk by the light of that city,
and kings will bring their riches there.
²⁵Its gates are always open during the day, and night never comes.
- ²⁶The glorious treasures of nations will be brought into the city.
²⁷But nothing unworthy will be allowed to enter.
No one who is dirty-minded or who tells lies will be there.
Only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life
will be in the city.
Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Isaiah 53:2-12

- ² Like a young plant or a root that sprouts in dry ground,
the servant grew up obeying the LORD.
He wasn't some handsome king.
Nothing about the way he looked made him attractive to us.
- ³ He was hated and rejected;
his life was filled with sorrow and terrible suffering.
No one wanted to look at him.
We despised him and said, "He is a nobody!"
- ⁴ He suffered and endured great pain for us,
but we thought his suffering was punishment from God.
- ⁵ He was wounded and crushed because of our sins;
by taking our punishment, he made us completely well.
- ⁶ All of us were like sheep that had wandered off.
We had each gone our own way,
but the LORD gave him the punishment we deserved.
- ⁷ He was painfully abused, but he did not complain.
He was silent like a lamb being led to the butcher,
as quiet as a sheep having its wool cut off.
- ⁸ He was condemned to death without a fair trial.
Who could have imagined what would happen to him?
His life was taken away because of the sinful things
my people had done.
- ⁹ He wasn't dishonest or violent,
but he was buried in a tomb of cruel and rich people.
- ¹⁰ The LORD decided his servant would suffer as a sacrifice
to take away the sin and guilt of others.
Now the servant will live to see his own descendants.
He did everything the LORD had planned.
- ¹¹ By suffering, the servant will learn the true meaning of obeying the LORD.
Although he is innocent,
he will take the punishment for the sins of others,
so that many of them will no longer be guilty.
- ¹² The LORD will reward him with honor and power for sacrificing his life.
Others thought he was a sinner,
but he suffered for our sins and asked God to forgive us.