

“Turning the World Upside Down”

NT: Mark 9:30-37
James 3:13-4:8a
Acts 17:6

Would you rather...

Be a tree or live in a tree for the rest of your life?

Be without elbows or without knees?

Be the clown that distracts the bull or the cowboy who rides the bull?

Always wear earmuffs or always wear a nose plug?

Be able to stop time or fly?

Have a tattoo of the last book you read or the last tv show/movie you watched?

Be a tiny rhino or a giant hamster?

Have one wish granted today or 3 wishes granted over 10 years?

Only be able to whisper or only be able to shout?

Go a month without internet or a month without bathing?

Sound like Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck the rest of your life?

Always talk in rhymes or sing instead of speak?

Have an elephant trunk or a giraffe neck?

These are fun and great conversation starters if you ever need to break the ice. They usually don't require much thinking, just a chance to react and imagine. I have another one that I really would like to invite us to think more about because it has to do with the texts we have heard in Mark and James. **Would you rather... be accused of turning the world upside down as a part of building it back up or be accused of doing nothing while watching the world go wherever it will with you apart of it?**

What our passages in Mark and James lead us to today is that we, as Christians, have been invited on a special mission. Our mission is the same mission the early disciples were invited and commissioned to take, turning the world upside down. And believe it or not, because of the good news, our mission is not mission impossible. (If I could cue the theme music I would 😊) To turn something upside down, a cup or a situation or the world, you can also use words like flip over, uproot, derail, or topsy turvy. For the sake of the definition, it is often used with a negative connotation, but just like Jesus and his way of living and teaching, this is one more example of turning a meaning “upside down” for good.

The first passage we heard today is a continuation of a kingdom story worth retelling from the gospel of Mark we encountered a few weeks ago in our summer sermon series. The focus of it helps us define who Jesus is as Messiah, the one who suffers at the hands of the world's power and goes to the cross to die as a way to save true life (a scandalous act “upside down” from the world's perspective), and what Jesus as Messiah means for our life as Christians.

This passage in Mark 9:30-37 emphasizes that the disciples' lives will mirror the one to whom they are committed. In this story, Jesus has caught the disciples in an argument over who is the greatest. Competition of power, wealth, and prestige infected all the cultures included in the Roman Empire, and apparently the disciples shared in those values. What Jesus heard fell short of God's way. Measuring who is the greatest is not the goal, nor the point.

I am quite baffled, although now surprised, by the notion that Jesus' teaching that the first shall be last, to give value to all and serve all with love and welcome everyone as a child, was considered to be upside down hospitality. If it wasn't, why did he say what he said? Jesus said this and gave example to this because people weren't being hospitable, serving others in love, and weren't welcoming everyone as a child. Therefore, it had, somehow, become accepted and justified not to be hospitable to all and not to welcome children. I am sorry but I just think there is a lot wrong with that. And I am not just saying that as a pastor to a church, I am saying it as a fellow human being and a father.

How does Jesus respond to this sinful shortcoming? In the gospel of John, this is when we get the story of Jesus getting up from the table and washing the disciples' feet as an act of servant leadership. Here in Mark, we get Jesus teaching them about divine things; things that turn the world upside down.

God's way, in which Jesus embodies purely, is a way of service and hospitality and welcome. Jesus teaches, "the first will be last and anyone who welcomes a child welcomes me and the one who sent me." The term servant used here references someone who served meals. In context, the person who was "servant of all" was the lowest in rank of all the servants; the one who would be allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill. A child was seen as lowly as a servant. Both were without honor or high social standing. Jesus' teaching then is a liberating word to those considered the least of these (Matthew 25). Faithfulness to God's way is helping to assign worth and importance to every person. Doing so may be considered "upside down" to the world, but to God it is "right side up."

The second passage we heard is from the letter of James, who writes from his position as Jewish Christian leader, brother of Jesus, and convicted believer that faith in God is incomplete without faithful action.

"James' letter is theocentric (focused on God), not Christocentric (focused on Christ). Good Jew that he was, James did not build his argument on the mystery of his brother's death and resurrection but on the elemental faith in God that allowed his brother to live and die the way he did. In Jesus, wisdom from above met wisdom from below, so that

everyone could see which one was which. In him, God's Word became flesh indeed."
(Barbara Brown Taylor- FOTW)

One of the key words in this James passage is "wisdom." We all want to be wise, don't we? But according to what standard? The only wisdom that interests James is wisdom from above, which has nothing to do with having good ideas and everything to do with living good lives. For James it is not faith or action. For James, faith and action make coherent wisdom. James outlines some "wise" action and we can apply his outline to what life is to look like in a church community exemplifying God's image:

- Church leaders are elected because of their Godly wisdom.
- Worship leadership is shared among the church membership of all ages and stations.
- Disputes are handled with mercy and love, seeking peace.
- Stewardship is not just a season of pledge collection, but a yearlong spiritual discipline taught and lived by the community.
- Prayer seeks the good fruits that will meet the needs of all.
- Peacemaking and social-justice ministries become ways of addressing the earthly wisdom that surrounds us. Those who truly love God cannot fail to live in peace with one another.
- Our identity is measured by our closeness to God.

To bridge between Mark and James, there is a third verse from Acts that I would like to bring into our equation today. In Acts 17, Luke talks about Paul's visit to Thessalonica. At first, Paul had great success until the Jewish opponents began to spread rumors and stir up the rabble of the town. Eventually there was a riot and the mob found some of the Christians and dragged them before the rulers of the city. Listen to what the authorities convicted them for. Acts 17:6 says, "These Christians who have been turning the world upside down have come here also." Another translation uses the phrase "These upsetters of the whole world." Another translates it as "these fellows, who have turned the world topsy-turvy." They meant it as an accusation, but from God's perspective, it is really a compliment to the work being done. Think about it. What a great thing to have said about you; you managed to turn the world upside down.

But how, we might ask? How did they do it? How do we do it? Being a believer doesn't just mean someone who hears and agrees with Jesus. Being a believer is someone who acts on their belief that the truth of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was so powerful, it reshaped history.

The disciples turned apostles who turned the world upside down brought with them nothing but news – good news. That's all they had. They had no worldly power, although God's Spirit was with them. They had no weapons, unless you consider the good news a weapon (that would be a fun topic to unpack). What

they had was a message of a King who had come to die for all humanity and rise again from the grave. What they did was talk about Jesus wherever they went, and the world was turned upside down! To talk here implies spoken and unspoken proclamation: both words and actions.

What we learn is that the act of believing and having faith gives birth to a new way of life. It was Paul who declared, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old life has gone, and a new life has begun."

Consider this: One day you're free to sleep in, go wherever you want, have free time. Then you have a baby, and you become a parent. Your entire world is turned upside down. You're up all hours of the night. You're completely exhausted. The baby constantly needs you. But you don't mind it one bit because the baby has transformed you – given you new life, new purpose, new meaning. You gladly give up your rights for the good of your child.

I think believing the gospel is something like that. Our world must turn upside down before it can be built right side up. When you're grappling with what the gospel says, and what it means for your life, it can get pretty uncomfortable, but when you hand your life over to God, you realize you haven't given up anything, but you've gained everything. You've been adopted into God's family, and no one can snatch you out of God's hand. You have peace. You have hope. You have joy that cannot be taken. You're in a new Kingdom and your life becomes a beacon to that kingdom.

"Radical servant leadership is not just for *you and* the church; it is also the witness of the church (*God*) to the world." (Nathan Jennings- FOTW)

I am not sure how "the right side up" ever got normalized to the point it has with what has and continues to happen in the world but based on what we come to witness and know about Jesus through his radical and quite scandalous efforts to show humanity the way of God's kingdom, there is a better "right side up." Jesus was good at challenging what had come to be accepted as status quo with what really mattered. Jesus was good at staying focused on divine things while others were justifying human things. God's "right side up" was, and still is I think, the world's "upside down."

So personally, to answer the "Would You Rather" question of the day, I think I would rather be accused of turning the world upside down to build it back up, especially if we are talking about hospitality, serving others in love, and welcoming children. I am all in on this! I am all in to turning the world upside down for the sake of God's kingdom. I am all in for topsy turvy and radical showdowns between God's way and the way of the world, especially when I consider how the way of the world is working for everyone. Or is it 😊?

How about you? You may be thinking, "I don't know. I can't turn anyone's world upside down. I'm too shy. I don't know my Bible well enough. I'm not very bold." Remember, God makes ordinary people extraordinary everyday through God's love and mercy and we have the opportunity to be a part of that. Not to earn us a better place at the table in heaven or to be known as the greatest, but because that is who God created us to be.

How about us, together as the church? As the church, called to faithfulness, we are invited to ask whether we are helping to turn the world upside down. How are we as leaders of the congregation getting along with one another and with all people? What is our mode of leadership and our approach to decision making? If we follow the rule of faith in our interpretation, then being the community of disciples is nothing less than being the body of our radical Messiah. In so many words and ways, what if that is what others said about First Presbyterian Church, Lynchburg, VA: "These are the people who have turned the world upside down."?