

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN; MATTHEW 18: 21-35; SEPTEMBER 17, 2017; A.
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was tempted this morning to ask the choir to sing *The World Turned Upside Down* from *Hamilton* and to wear a powdered wig, an 18th continental army uniform, and deliver my whole sermon in rap. Now, that might be thought of as the world turned upside down, for this is the pulpit of Westminster Presbyterian Church, and we don't play dress-up here, although Pastor Yorty does wear a medieval academic robe, and has occasionally been seen swinging a censer. But he draws the line at a wig, and I suspect, at preaching in rap. But consider this a challenge, Pastor Tom.

The musical *Hamilton* has reinvigorated the phrase *The World Turned Upside Down* and given many younger Americans a renewed interest in American Revolutionary War history, so that many people are again familiar with the story of General Cornwallis' surrender to General Washington at Yorktown, when the British marched out of their fortifications to the tune of a 17th century English ballad *The World Turned Upside Down*, a song that itself came out of the upheavals of the English Civil War in the 1640s. The song became a commentary on the meaning of Yorktown and of the whole American Revolution—that those on the bottom were now on the top, and that the age of democracy and enlightenment had truly arrived.

I want you to consider, though, whether we might turn the phrase itself upside down: let's consider whether what we think the phrase means is NOT what the phrase means—that political and military results are NOT what turns the world upside down. Even more radical, let's consider whether political agitation and warfare might just be the world as it usually is, not the world turned upside down. Let's consider whether what is breathlessly reported on television or endlessly analyzed in print might just be the normal world playing out its normal game, and part of that game is calling the ordinary extraordinary. Trumpism? North Korea? Charlottesville? These upset us, and they should, but I want you to consider whether any of them are turning the world upside down. I ask you to consider the notion that what we conventionally think of as radical is better thought of as ordinary, in the light of today's readings from Matthew. Consider whether today's words of Jesus call us to think differently and to act in the world counter-intuitively. My contention is that Jesus' words ask us really to live upside down.

A good start in jarring our thinking is to consider the origin of the phrase itself, "The World Turned Upside Down." Does it come from the political and military upheavals of the 17th and 18th centuries, as I bet you would have expected? No, it comes instead from the translators of the King James Version of the Bible, that exquisite piece of writing that has defined how we speak and write ever since it was published in 1611. Great care was given to balance accurate translation with beautiful expression that was still earthy enough to resonate with common people. And think of the phrases that were created: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." "Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof." "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt

among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” Such beautiful expressive phrases, and so easy to remember! I like to think that worship at Westminster is modeled on the example of these translators as we strive in art, music and word to enter into the world above our daily experience, the unseen realm that gives meaning and form to our material and rational existence.

It was these linguistically sensitive writers who invented the phrase “the world turned upside down.” They used it when translating Acts 17: 6: “These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.” This passage captures the complaints against Paul made by the local men in power in Thessalonica. They were complaining about the activities of Paul and Silas, for Paul and Silas had just come to Thessalonica and their reputation had preceded them. Paul arrived preaching the message of Jesus and in Thessalonica he was attracting a diverse group of followers: low-born, upper-class, women from every class, officials, tradesmen, merchants, slaves, citizens, Jews, Greeks—all in all, a cross-section of society, a social reality that only intensified fears among the local power establishments. Paul’s message was simple: a new community based on the life and teachings of Jesus was available to all. But Paul’s gospel message carried profound social implications that, if actualized, had the potential to turn the world upside down. The very existence of this new social reality being borne in the middle of Thessalonica was an existential threat to local social, political, cultural and social order. And, of course, the power elites grounded their advantages in this social order in the structure of the universe itself. Paul was disrupting the great chain of being, a chain that connected the lowest things to the highest things, and which was, by necessity, also keeping everyone in their social prisons, with the elites on top. Paul was turning the world upside down.

What exactly was Paul’s topsy-turvy message? Nothing less than the subversive teachings of Jesus, which Paul knew in oral form or in written fragments circulating inside Christian communities. And our passage from Matthew 18 today is one of those important fragments. Today’s reading not only turns the outer world upside down, but it disrupts and challenges our inner world. It represents the difficult, demanding side of the gospel, for it shows how much we must change if we want to usher in and live inside the Kingdom of God.

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’

This is such a human question asked by Peter, who functions as a stand-in for you and me. Peter poses as a magnanimous person, projecting a desire to forgive while trying to establish a limit to his generosity. Note that in this theoretical question about forgiving Peter assumes *he* has the power to grant or withhold forgiveness. He presumes that to forgive is in his gift to bestow or not. In actuality, Peter’s question is hardly innocent, for he is trying to avoid the personal costs of forgiveness. I have asked many such disingenuous questions in my life, and I can recognize one when I see it.

How does Jesus respond?

Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

In other words, too many times to keep track. This was not the answer Peter wanted to hear. But Jesus didn't pick seventy-seven out of thin air. He was alluding to a story in Genesis 4, a passage about the expansion of the human family after Adam and Eve. In it, Lamech, a fifth generation descendent of Adam, brags:

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.

It's a passage about honor killing and human pride and, above all, about the increasing violence of humankind as civilization expanded. Lamech seems to be pleased that his one act of willful violence will result in the increase of violence seventy-sevenfold in society. Indeed, he presents an increase of violence so comprehensive as to be almost impossible to track and understand. It's a violence that takes on a life of its own, that catches everyone in its maw. As the German artist Kathe Kollwitz wrote the year before she died in Berlin in April 1945, "Every war already carries within it the war that will answer it. Every war is answered by a new war, until everything is smashed." Can you see what Jesus is getting at? Peter asks about forgiveness inside of a violent worldview, a worldview that thinks the Kingdom of God will be inaugurated with violence to match the violence of evil. It's the only way of thinking Peter knows. Inside Peter's world, to personally forgive seven times is far past what is required. Jesus, though, turns Peter's world upside down by taking the story of Lamech and turning it upside down. If uncontrollable violence results in settling uncountable scores, then Jesus proposes that uncontrollable goodness will result from innumerable acts of forgiveness.

And then, as usual, Jesus tells a story.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents^[a] was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

This was a remarkable act of forgiveness for the debt was the equivalent of the tribute payment by Galilee to Rome over a fifteen-year period. In other words, it was a sum so large as to be beyond comprehension. And it was this exaggerated amount that the king forgave. Jesus is a master of hyperbole. But does the forgiven slave contribute to this culture of generosity and forgiveness? Alas, no.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii,^[b] and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

Now a hundred denarii are about three months' wages, a small amount to this newly enriched slave. But he still demands what he deems justice. He accepts his own forgiveness as an evidence of his personal worthiness, but then sees his demand for repayment as evidence of his own sense of justice. The governing idea is that he favors his own advantage—his perspective is entirely self-centered, as judgment so often is, and he does not have a comprehensive vision of the social dimensions of forgiveness. And the consequences?

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^[c] from your heart.'

This is a hard ending, but it's a mistake to think of a vengeful God meting out specific and personal punishments. No, the torture referred to happens on automatic pilot, as the natural consequences of doing our small part in weaving a social fabric of retribution and narrow-minded justice. And Jesus concludes by warning us that if we neglect forgiveness, then the world we build will be the world we have to live in, a world of perpetual enmity and violence. We will get what we want, and we will get it hard.

Are we able to enter mentally and emotionally into the upside down world Jesus is pointing us toward? Jesus' larger view of justice, mercy and forgiveness, a view that escapes our personal and parochial biases, sees that acts of forgiveness and mercy are what heal the world. If we can put aside our own self-interested desire for vengeance, judgment and respect, and instead learn to forgive and forbear, then we will be participating in the Kingdom of God, and the overflow of goodness will be impossible to track and understand. The peace of God will take on a life of its own and will catch everyone up in a conspiracy of goodness, a conspiracy that could be as comprehensive as the conspiracy of violence.

But do we really believe that forgiveness is this powerful? Here's a story:

On June 17, 2015, a white supremacist gunman sat through a Wednesday night Bible Study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and then calmly shot nine African-American worshippers. In November 2015, Time magazine published an article that can be described as an extended meditation on forgiveness. Here are some excerpts:

At a time when the violent deaths of African Americans were triggering protests and even rioting from Missouri to Maryland—and a national movement sprang up to proclaim that Black Lives Matter—here was a cold-blooded attack by an avowed white supremacist intending to provoke a race war in the heart of the old Confederacy.

But instead of war, Charleston erupted in grace, led by the survivors of the Emanuel Nine. It happened suddenly, but not every survivor was on board. For some it was too soon; for others, too simple. Even so, within 36 hours of the killings, and with pain racking their voices, family members stood in a small county courtroom to speak the language of forgiveness.

What Nadine Collier said at the podium, while choking back sobs, came out like this: “I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again—but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you.”

Anthony Thompson put it this way, speaking quietly: “I would just like him to know that—to say the same thing that was just said—I forgive him, and my family forgives him. But we would like him to take this opportunity to repent. Repent,” he repeated. “Confess. Give your life to the one who matters most, Christ, so that he can change him. And change your ways, so no matter what happens to you, you’ll be O.K.

The brief televised hearing electrified the country. President Obama was swept up by the feeling during his eulogy for slain Emanuel pastor the Rev. Clementa Pinckney and shifted into song: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound ...” Within days the most contentious public symbol of South Carolina’s Civil War past, the Confederate battle flag, was removed from the state capitol grounds with relatively little of the controversy that had surrounded it for decades.

No cheap grace here. But a determination to cut the cords that tie one violent act to another. And a determined choice to trust that God will do the judging, not us. And a determined faith that things will work out for good outside of our understanding or control, and that if we act upside down in the world, that we will be harbingers of God’s coming kingdom. And that kingdom will be a harmonious kingdom, where each of us will be known and loved. That’s not a message we often hear, that an upside down world outside of our control will be harmonious, and, see, there is nothing harmonious about the disruptive upside down world portrayed on the cover of our bulletin this morning. For when we on our own disrupt the world, nothing harmonious results. God’s disruptive upside down world comes with a promise: that our world, like ourselves, can be healed through faith, hope and love.

Amen.