

The Upside Down
Matthew 20:1-16
Annual Conference 2018
Pastor Brian Messler
Thursday July 5, 2018

Prayer:

Wonderful, grace giving God. We thank you for the grace you give to us in the midst our brokenness and selfishness. Help us to understand the blessings that you give us, those right in front of us and those blessings that you send our way along the journey. Today; however, empower us to understand how we can bind ourselves to one another in a way that honors your call for us to be the body of Christ and to lift one another up as his disciples. Praying this all in the name of the one who give us abundant life in an upside-down world, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Sermon:

I can be a little bit of a nerd. I love Star Wars, the original, of course, and I think Jar Jar Binks is the worse character of all time. I love most of the Marvel movies, Lord of the Rings, awesome. I like science fiction and love movies that really have this good vs. evil depiction in them. Over the last number of months, I have been watching this show on Netflix called Stranger Things. Now, for those of you who have not heard of or seen this show, there are two different realities or dimensions that are depicted throughout the series. These dimensions occur at the same time and, have the same locations – thus making them parallel dimensions. One dimension is the current life as we know it, and the other is a dark reflection, or echo of our world, a place of decay and death, cold, unyielding, and filled with evil creatures. In fact, this alternate dimension is one that brings about pain, struggle, and fear to those in the show. This other dimension in this show is referred to as the Upside Down.

While this is a show on Netflix, I often find that in order to reach those who have a post Christian worldview, where I have found most people know about Jesus, but don't really care, I find that having parables such as movies and tv shows, that they can have the ability to transcend both the secular and sacred in order to communicate the transformative power of Jesus and the hope found in living a life that would bring honor and glory to God. In this search to connect, in some way, the sacred and secular, this TV show has given me something to think about and I have been working through something that I wanted to share. This concept of the upside down in this Netflix show is interesting. It is a dark reflection of what was intended, what was created to be whole.

As I began thinking of the upside down in the show and then our current reality in this world, to be completely candid, I believe that I have, we have created and live in the upside down, that dark echo of the world God desired and desires for us. Our choices, our actions, our lives have created a world that perpetuates the darkness, the cold. We create this world when we do not follow God's call to its fullest, when we do not yield to God's will and ways, when we do not take to heart the essence of what it means to be Christ followers. We create the upside down when, as individuals, as communities, even as the church, we create a world that is full of fear, struggle, and pain; when we create a world where fame and money are looked to as a picture of success; we create the upside down when we don't recognize that we are people of power and privilege who are constantly pushing others down and away. Friends, we see fear rising in our schools, our churches, our denomination, our homes, and our workplaces. We see unity crumbling right before our eyes. We have damaged our understanding of what it means to be the church of Jesus – a place where hope is prevalent, where joy is abundant, and where peace reigns in the hearts and minds of each person. Yes, we have created the upside down – a place that is far different than what God desires for us. I pray that we have a yearning to be a people who are not fear driven, but faith driven. That we yearn to love God fully, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves!

That we yearn to be followers, to be disciples, to be living examples of Jesus! That we yearn to be a selfless people, willing to surrender all for the gospel of Christ.

As we look at our scripture today, we see a prime example of how we have created this upside down, a world that is different than what God has intended. Work in the vineyard was extremely difficult. For instance, a vineyard was generally planted on terraced hillsides, most of which were stony. To prepare these spaces for farming, workers were needed to dig out the tiers. They use the stones they dug out to build these retaining walls. When the terraced areas were completed, they had to be filled with good soil which usually had to be carried a considerable distance up the slopes from more fertile ground below. This was back breaking, in the sun kind of work.

Imagine with me what it was like for these workers who needed to get up early. They get up before sunrise, eat a hurried breakfast, and walk down to the corner where the master of the vineyard picks them up and takes them to the vineyard beginning their day, at 6am. The day continues and all they can probably think about was getting home. They see people joining the ranks throughout the day, some mid-day and, some late in the day. They don't really care at the time because they were probably thinking about how dusty and sweaty and hot and yucky they were feeling. The hours passed them by and they are about finished. They are ready to go home, clean up, have something to eat, perhaps, if they had family, muster the strength to enjoy some down time with them. They are ready to sleep. Now I don't know about you, but I have spent some long days working. Not only in pastoral ministry, where perhaps it is more of a mental, emotional, or spiritual drain than anything else, but on service projects, with Brethren Volunteer Service, just getting things done around the house, and on mission trips, where literally moving 10 tons of bricks by hand, each day for a week, yes, not by wheelbarrow, but by hand was the job. On those days, I am ready to drop, and honestly, my filter, you know the be kind to others filter, be encouraging to others filter, be loving to others filter, yeah, that one, isn't there. I can imagine these workers, ready to go home, to get rested because they knew they would need to be back the next day. And they get in line to get paid.

As they got in line, the frustration must have been growing because they were there the longest and then needed to wait again, until those that were there just for a few short hours were getting paid. But as they looked on up ahead of them, things began to look good. It looked good for the one hour workers, who received a whole day's pay for one hour's work. But not only did things look good to the one-hour workers. Things looked good to the twelve-hour workers as well. They looked over the shoulders of the ones who were paid first, whipped out their pocket calculators, and figured that they were going to get a ton of money! In their minds they were already home announcing the good news to the family. They were impressed with the generosity of the vineyard owner. They didn't stay impressed. They get to the owner and the owner gives them the same amount as everyone else, the amount that was promised and the workers lose it – their filter not intact, their mind racing and possibly raging with frustration.

The scripture starts with this wonderful phrase – “the kingdom of heaven is like” – when that happens I always go to the bottom of the parable, because it sums it all up there. If we put the two phrases together, the beginning and the end, it reads like this – “the kingdom of heaven is when the last shall be first and the first shall be last”. That is a simplistic way to look at it, but it is not simple in the least bit.

See, just a few moments before, in chapter 19, before Jesus shares this parable, he and his disciples were talking with this guy about eternal life. A rich man had come to Jesus asking what to do to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus told him to sell all he had, give to the poor, and come and follow Him. The rich man went away sorrowful, because he had a lot of possessions. As the disciples watched it happen, Peter, strong Peter was the only one that had enough courage to ask Jesus what all of the other disciples were probably thinking: “Lord, this rich man went away sad because he had great possessions, and he wasn't willing to give them up. However, we're still here. We haven't gone away, and we have

left everything – our livelihoods, our families, everything to follow You. What are we going to get? What’s in it for us?” That was the new revised Brian version. If you had been in Jesus’ shoes, you could easily have gotten discouraged, even frustrated. Jesus had been working with these men for almost three years, trying to teach them the values of the kingdom of God, discipling them in their connection with God and with one another. If it had been one of us responding to Peter’s comments, we might easily have said, “You dudes are hopeless. Give me another twelve. I’m starting over.” But Jesus was patient, and He met them where they were. He said, “In the kingdom, there are going to be twelve thrones, and you will each have a throne, and will judge the twelve tribes of Israel.” And you can imagine Peter and the other disciples standing a little taller, a little more excited as they begin to picture the scene of the blessings they were going to receive.

But then Jesus makes a very interesting statement that we can’t miss. “Every one that has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold”, and Mark’s telling of this encounter adds, and this is important, “Now in this time... and in the world to come eternal life”. Please notice the two moments that we receive the blessings. Those who have abandoned all and followed Jesus will receive a hundredfold. When? Now. At this present time. And the other blessing is eternal life at the end of the age when Jesus comes again.

Let us unpack this understanding of blessings now and in the future, as I believe this is vital to our text of this day. One of the greatest scriptures that I believe help us to understand how God shares blessings is in Psalm 23 – many of us know this Psalm. In the middle of the Psalm, David writes that God prepares a table before us, in the presence of our enemies. The table in the Psalm, I believe refers to the blessings that God desires for us, the shalom God desires to give us, even in the midst of those who do us harm, bring us pain, try to instill fear in us, or perhaps other ways that we might consider someone an enemy. This verse though carries with it something that I think is vital and reinforces the text of the day. In reference to the table, this verse carries with it a preposition, qualifying time and space, and an adjective, making the noun more specific. Specifically, as a preposition, the image goes like this; God prepares a table in the presence of our enemies – a concept of time and space – going ahead of us to prepare that table of peace, of blessing, during the trials, during the valley times of life, and in the midst of those that do not like us, do not care for us, and desire to do us harm. God makes sure that there is the macro, the great blessings of life that we will run into because God goes ahead of us to prepare it. As an adjective, the image goes like this; God prepares a table before us, right now, right here, and right in front of our face, while we are in the valley, in the pain, in the struggle, and in the upside-down. The blessing of God is right here in this room friends, right in front of us, right before us, sitting right next to us. If we then piece together this verse; and place these two types of speech together; here is our God, always preparing blessings for us, those blessings right in our face, right now, and those down the road, waiting for us, in the presence of those who we may be fearful of, even as we are trying to find our way out of the valley.

With this understanding that God gives blessings now and, in the future, let’s return to the worker in the vineyard so that we can connect the rest of the story. I believe that in this parable of the vineyard owner and the workers, Jesus is saying there are two blessings the workers receive – the blessings right now being that the all-day workers were able to serve this generous vineyard owner, and the blessings in the future are the treasures they receive at the end of the day. I think the workers miss that – they know the blessings to come later, they know that they are going to receive the payment – or, as Jesus is telling them, an eternity, but they do not revel or find joy in the blessing of just serving, of being with the vineyard. How rewarding is it to see things accomplished, to be in meaningful service throughout the day, throughout our lives. It isn’t necessary for us to wait until the end to receive the blessings that God has for us because God is giving us the blessings right now, in our face, as we labor, and God is preparing a space for us – a table for us for all eternity. If you know that you have a vital relationship with Jesus, if you know God and all the love God has for us, then your focus is not to be just

on the reward at the end of the day. Your primary focus is the joy of fellowship and service with God right now. The workers in this parable miss this important point.

It seems to me that the most joy-filled person is the one who has surrendered their will, their life to God's will, and the most miserable person today is the one who looks out for themselves, who is selfish with their lives. If your whole focus is on yourself and on trying to make yourself happy, trying to always be correct, you will be miserable. But when you forget self and reach out to others, you will find joy.

The kingdom of God is when the first shall be last and the last shall be first. There is a certain sense of joy that we can have in being last, putting others above ourselves, working longer in the vineyard. Jesus is saying that the workers who have been there all day – you already have your blessing, you will receive a hundred times more than anything you can imagine because you have already been following me, don't worry about what the others will receive, your blessing will come, your blessing will be in abundance, your blessing will be amazing and beyond all comprehension. And Jesus is saying to those workers who have been there just for a little while – I have blessings for you as well, I have joy for you, I have hope for you, and you will receive an eternity of God's peace.

Here is where it hit home for me, friends, I am an all-day worker, we are the all-day workers?! We are there at the back of the line, ready to get this big blessing, looking at all the others to see what they get so that we can get what we think we truly deserve. Surely, the people who came after us, surly those who slept in, surely those who aren't as strong as we are won't get what we get! The workers at the end are selfish people, they are living in and because of their selfishness, they perpetuate, we perpetuate the upside down, a dark reflection of the world God has always desired for us.

Brothers and sisters, we can be selfish, and we perpetuate the upside-down by our actions, by our words, by our pointing fingers, by our lack of confession, by our lack of forgiveness, by our lack of unity. We point to one another and say that others not good enough to receive the blessings we receive, or we debate whether others should even receive the blessings that God desires to give, don't we? This is an upside-down thought especially when we have no authority or control over the gifts that are given. In fact, we don't deserve the gifts that we receive, and it is only by God's grace that we receive them. It is only by God's infinite and wonderful grace that we are even in the vineyard to begin with. However, we like to put the boundaries on everyone else? We talk and complain and live in fear and create this upside down which is far different than God's world which is meant to be pure and holy. We create disunity in our families, our lives, our churches, our denomination, our world because we have yet to understand one of the fundamental truths of our faith – God is in control – Jesus is central – the Spirit is the only guide – and we are not. We are not the giver – we are not the ones who decide – we are not the last word. Our role in this world is to be obedient to God, to surrender to the leadership of Jesus, and to yield to the Spirit's calling in our lives. Every action, every word we utter, every step we take, every move we make, (got you thinking of the song, right), every part of who we are and how we live our lives, and I say this at ECOB all the time, every part of who we are and what we do is a direct reflection of our relationship with Jesus. God has blessings for us, friends, and if we are constantly looking at the blessings of others, wondering what they will get, or even determining what they should or should not be getting, then we will miss the blessings God has for us.

So, if we want to grumble, and complain, and worry, and live in fear, we can go ahead and do that. We can allow our selfishness, our desires, our anxieties to control us! We can live in and perpetuate the upside-down if we want to, we can complain that others are receiving the same blessings we are receiving and that we are not getting what we think we deserve. Yes, we have worked hard and served Jesus, and tried to live an upright and holy life. In chapter 19, Jesus addresses that and will honor that obedience! But please friends, let us not look down on others because they entered the vineyard late – or – worry about how God may be blessing them in ways that we thought were reserved for us. We are not the givers of blessings, and although we are to share about God, live out our faith,

and honor one another, we are not the protector/perfecter of the faith. Perhaps we waste so much of our time in the vineyard protecting what we think we deserve, we waste too much time complaining about the blessings God has given others when, in fact, it is not our job or role or in our authority to protect them. We are not in control of the vineyard - Jesus is, the Holy Spirit is, and our Creator is – they are the ones who will give out the blessings as they see fit to do so.

Yes, we can perpetuate this kind of dis-unity, and finger pointing, but I can no longer be a part of it. I can only speak for myself, but how I have grown weary and ready to move forward in Christ. Perhaps I need to take a lesson from Jesus in this parable, to just be thankful for being in the vineyard in the first place, to learn to be joy-filled because of the blessings, both now and in the future in store for me. Perhaps it is time for me to truly consider the phrase that, “everything I do in my life is a direct reflection of my relationship with Jesus.” I am done with low living, worrying about the blessings God discerns to shower on each person, I am finished with debating and worrying and living in fear on things that have no consequence to my salvation in Jesus. I am finished worrying and wondering and focusing on whether or not churches close, debates are won, or even if our beloved denomination rises or falls. If you want worry about those things, fret about those things, and debate those things, you can take my share. Because brothers and sisters, our unity as a church, as a denomination, as the body is not based on agendas, on stances, on anything but the salvation that is found through Jesus and the wonderful grace of God. Our unity will occur when, as disciples, we focus on being in the vineyard together, serving together, being blessed together. And unity will happen when we believe that God is the only one who is the giver of all blessings and at no point are we to try and control that narrative, worry about what we are getting, or robbing the joy of those whom God has blessed.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a trip which he took to Hawaii. Jet lag kept him awake late into night and he went for a walk on the streets of Honolulu. At 2 in the morning, he found himself in a doughnut shop. Sitting at the counter, he overheard several prostitutes who were sharing a booth. One of the girls whose name was Agnes mentioned that it was her birthday. After she had left, Tony turned to the cook and the other prostitutes and said, “Let’s throw a party for Agnes.” The other girls agreed to bring decorations and the cook said that he would bake a cake. The next night, they all gathered at the shop and when Agnes walked in, they brought out the cake and began to sing, “Happy Birthday.” Tears streamed down Agnes’s face and, when it came time to cut the cake, she just stood there. Finally, she said, “Could I buy another cake and we eat that one? I want to take this one home and show it to my mother.” With that, she took the cake and left. In the sudden silence that filled the shop after she left, Tony bowed his head and began to pray. “Lord, we thank you for Agnes and for your love for her. You loved her enough to send Your Son to die for her on the cross. We thank you for the best present of all - the present of your own Son. Amen.” When he raised his head, he saw that all of the prostitutes had their heads bowed and had been praying with him. The cook looked at him and said, “You’re a preacher!” When Tony admitted that he was, the cook asked, “What kind of church do you have?” In a sudden flash of insight, Tony replied, “The kind that throws parties for prostitutes and gives invitations to sinners.”

I want to be a church, a denomination like that, friends. We can choose to be that kind of church – allowing everyone, including a sinner like me to be in the vineyard. Let’s take what God desires to give to us, because friends, and here is hope for us all this evening, it is a blessing beyond blessing. And that blessing that God is giving us is right here right now, in this room waiting to be received, waiting to be recognized, and waiting to be celebrated – not only is that blessing from God right here, right now, in our face, but there is a blessing waiting for us church, it is waiting for us to get out of the upside down and into a right side up world that God wants for us, a world that is broken and lost and hurting to become a family of disciples that connect to, grow in, live out, and radiate the transformative power of Jesus.