

Living Upside Down

Last week we touched on a line from Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (*1 Corinthians 1.18, NRSV*)

Jesus says something that could have been, and indeed still is, easily misconstrued. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. That could be misunderstood that, for those who are dying, the message comes too late. "To us who are being saved it (the message) is the power of God." Potentially divisive language, yet still there is a deep message here.

What does salvation mean? It means "deliverance from sin and its consequences, believed by Christians to be brought about by faith in Christ." (*www.oed.com*) And so, for those who have chosen salvation or faith in Christ, the message of the cross is the power of God. For those who are perishing, the message doesn't matter.

In fact, the message of the cross is irrelevant if you are hungry or cold or ill in any way. Those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus know we have salvation through our belief in God. We cannot earn it in any way. It is given to us, without cost. In many ways, that is a near impossible gift to receive.

Yet if I am hungry and dehydrated, I cannot even think about God when my physical self is in harm's way. To the person who gives me water and fills my stomach, I will listen to anything they have to say. I will learn that the reason they fed and watered me is because it is the right thing to do, and this lesson was taught repeatedly by God, especially in the person of Jesus.

Does that make sense?

For too many years the doctrines of the Church brought division and caused camps to form. The righteous versus the wicked. The meek versus the powerful. The rich versus the poor.

The list goes on and on. It is time to, once again heed the messages of the Divine which tell us that in God's eyes we are all equal. In God's eyes, we are all beloved children. It has been my experience that in order to bring two warring factions together, the best beginning is to examine what we have in common.

Some people believe the liturgies of the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada are distant and uniquely different. When in fact, they follow a similar pattern in worship. The prayers use similar base sources, both denominations follow the revised common lectionary.

Both denominations support the sacraments of Baptism and Communion. Governance systems are different. Decisions are made differently. Both denominations are unabashedly in love with Jesus, have a deep and abiding faith in God and are led and uplifted by the Holy Spirit.

In all honesty, at our core, we are the same. We seek to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. We seek to protect the Earth, our fragile island home. We seek to serve justice for the marginalised in our world, especially for those unable to speak for themselves.

From the beginning of time, from the beginning of our faith, we have been called to turn society on its ear...just as Mary did when she answered God's call to be the light bearer. Just as Jesus did when he chose to die for the salvation of humanity. Just as we are called, today, to serve others, instead of ourselves. To speak the gospel message of love above all else.

And yet for many, who haven't heard the gospel message, they misunderstand what Church is. They think it's about weird rituals and diabolical handshakes. They think it's about serving the institution of the Church, rather than service to God and God's children.

And more often than not – we, as Church did get it horribly wrong.

The world we are living in feels as though it has been shaken upside down, as though in a snowglobe; shaken by a curious child.

COVID made us afraid – of the virus, of each other, of leaving our homes. And yet we yearned for connection and so we found a way to gather online. Here we are three years later. What began as Christ Church Anglican, together with Fernie Knox United, and slowly but surely we had new faces join us from around the globe. And as we've leaned into Ecumenical Shared Ministry, we've learned that we're really not all that different...in our hearts.

The world is upside down...
In the past week –

Tyre Nichols was beaten so severely by five police officers that he died in hospital from his injuries. Both Tyre and the five police are black.

On Holocaust Remembrance Day, in two separate instances seven people were killed and three more injured as Jews gathered for Sabbath prayers in Jerusalem. Later that day a 13-year old Palestinian boy opened fire seriously injuring a father and son.

In Toronto, Ontario seven separate incidents of violence have been reported on TTC buses, subway and streetcars in the past week alone.

Three people died in Auckland following record-setting torrential rain.

Chief Chris Skead of the Anishinabe of Wauzhushk Onigum Nation said 171 "plausible" graves of former pupils had been found at St. Mary's Indian Residential School in Kenora, Ontario. Five of the potential grave sites are marked.

There are hundreds more stories that fill you with grief, make you shake your head and feel like a punch to the stomach.

Our first reading from the prophet Micah pleads with God, asking what we must do to receive God's favour.

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (*Micah 6.6-8, NRSV*)

The world is broken.

The Church is broken.

Many of us feel broken. Or at the very least we feel inadequate, irrelevant, and overwhelmed with the sheer volume of grief and despair.

In assembling the statistics for 2022, I presided at 21 funerals. Seventeen of those were between June and September and seven of the 21 were deaths by suicide.

The Sermon on the Mount is where Jesus delivered one of his most powerful sermons, which we have come to know as the Beatitudes.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (*Matthew 5.2-11, NRSV*)

Roughly four thousand years ago, God told us that to live in the way God would have us do we must do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

How do we, in the twenty-first century, do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God?

I spent some time this week, reading through the headlines that broke my heart from around the world and was drawn constantly back to the Beatitudes. How do we take a text that is two centuries old and refresh the message for a world gone berserk?

How about this...

'Blessed are those with faith, for they shall know death is not the end.

Blessed are those whose children die from violence, for they shall never cease saying their children's names, and showing us love is the way.

Blessed are those who speak for the voiceless, clothe the naked and feed the hungry, for they truly are Christ's hands and feet in the world.

Blessed are the immigrants who seek a new and better life in this country, that they will apply their skills and find meaningful employment to fill the plethora of employment vacancies in this country.

Blessed are the hopeful, who despite all the darkness and sadness in the world, are capable of finding the slivers of light and the green shoots of new seeds planted generations ago.

Blessed are those who work in service; those who are spit at, sneered at, those who do jobs many would not undertake, in order to support their families and make a difference in the world. Yours is the gift of humanity that is sorely missing in this fractured world, and your leadership will inspire us to a new way.

Blessed are those without affordable housing, for they shall be the impetus to fight for better, safer, local housing in conjunction with access to mental health services for adults, youth and children.

Blessed are those who choose love over fear, for love will always find a way.

Blessed are the foolish who believe the world can be a good place if only we lead with love. That by bringing our small gestures of hope and love to the world, we will overwhelm the sadness, the hatred and the brokenness of the world as we forge a pathway illuminated by love.

We have many decisions to make, many meetings to have, many conversations to explore. There will be laughter, there will be tears, and as long as we depend on and trust one another – remembering that love always leads the way, we will be able to build a new way of being, together in Christ, through God, out into the world.

We need to turn this upside down world on its axis again, just as Mary foretold. To lean into justice, truth and love. And I stand here, foolish enough to believe we can do it.

Do you?

Let the Church say, Amen!

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United
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Sermon for 29 January 2023 - Epiphany 4
Micah 6.1-8, 1 Corinthians 1.18-31, Matthew 5.1-12