

“The Great Reversal”

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Text: Luke 6: 20 – 23

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A few years ago a pilot was practicing high-speed maneuvers in a jet fighter. She turned her controls for what she thought was a steep climb... and plunged into the earth. She wasn't aware that she had been flying upsidedown. We can find this story hard to believe. How could someone not know they were upsidedown? Christian writer and philosopher Dallas Willard calls this story “a parable of human existence in our times – not exactly that everyone is crashing, though there is enough of that – but most of us as individuals, and the world society as a whole, live at high speed, and often with no clue to whether we are flying upsidedown or right-side up. Indeed, we are haunted by a strong suspicion that there may be no difference.”

How should we look at the world? In the break-neck, high-tech life, how should we live? Is there a right-side up? Jesus' teachings are constant pointers to a reality that is so very hard for us to appreciate: God sees the world differently than we do. To go back to the pilot parable: we live life as if we are flying upsidedown, and we don't even realize it. The most beautiful and the most baffling teaching of Jesus we call the Beatitudes. It is a latin word that means “declared blessings”. They are beautiful as they paint a portrait of a life we crave, yet seemingly baffling in their unrealistic nature. Think about it: what is reality today? The meek get trampled, the persecuted can be unjustly dealt with, those who mourn have experienced real painful loss, and the spiritual zeroes don't have the resources to deal with problems. In today's real world, who do we think are blessed? Johnny Goudreau and Sean Monahan, who get to play their favourite childhood game for millions of dollars. Warren Buffet who has the Midas touch when it comes to investments. Oprah, who capitalizes on her understanding of culture and media. It would be no different in Jesus day (well, except for the hockey). For a poor people, living under Roman rule, for whom illness and suffering were real issues, they too would see the blessed as the wealthy and healthy, the powerful and well-regarded. Then as now, our society thinks THAT is the life rightside up. That's the blessed life.

Or is it? Jesus was an absolute nobody... until he started to preach about God. Two weeks ago we read in Luke 4, “He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone” (vs 13). People were saying, “He speaks with such authority and understanding!” He healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. He healed a leper and a paralysed man. He invited a few to join him, and they just dropped what they were doing and followed him. And word of him spread – this guy was different, important, somehow tapped into God. Early on they could see that this Jesus went against the grain... that he was a guy flying a different way. In Matthew it says that people came from Syria and beyond the Jordan (non-Jews), that they came to him from the Decapolis (the 10 cities of the region that were Greek and Roman colonies)

and from Judea and the Galilee (the Jews). In other words, people of every race and creed were travelling up to 100 km on foot to see Jesus, because clearly he was something so very different.

Matthew and Luke both recount that on one day a huge crowd gathered. He went up a hillside, sat down, and began to teach them. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man... for your reward is great in Heaven". What an extraordinary thing to say to a very ordinary crowd. For those there that day were the dispossessed, the ill, the poor, the oppressed, the average joe. And here Jesus was saying, for you there can be a great reversal. What he uttered that day gave hope.

The Beatitudes can seem like such an outlandish promise. How could Jesus possibly deliver on it? It can seem outlandish until you think about who made that promise. Christ eternal, the all-powerful creator, who lives beyond time, one with God. That's who. But for our sake Jesus accepted a great reversal for himself. The eternal one chose mortality. This part of God in the Trinity chose servanthood. The creative force of the universe was born as a helpless human baby. This part of God slipped into reverse and walked into our life, away from Kingship, away from power, away from influence, away from eternal spiritual life. Then he waded through the crowds, and the leaders and religious teachers. He swam against the currents of the assumptions of the age like a salmon swimming up river. He did and said things that was so out of sync with what people thought was reality. Jesus Himself was the great reversal. And in that ensured that things could be different... would be different. Ultimately the immortal accepted death that us mortals might have eternal life. Once we grasp this, life becomes different for us. We see life as a life filled with God's blessings. And we live life extending God's blessings.

These new Christians, in turn, began to swim against the current. In the second century AD the Romans were still trying to figure out who these Christians were. An administrator of one Roman province was commissioned to help Rome understand Christians better. He sent a report to the Emperor detailing his findings. To the administrator the amazing thing about these people was that these followers of Jesus cared for their widows and orphans. Imagine! The Romans tended not to do that. More astonishing, these followers of Jesus cared for those who were obviously dying. By comparison, many Romans would simply move the dying out of the house and let nature take its course. For the administrator this was the thing that made the Christians stand out in their society, more than anything else. Jesus said, Blessed are the poor, and hungry, and those who mourn, and those who are run down in life. The church would be a people of great reversal, that would bring God's blessing. In Canada, who fills the many opportunities to volunteer to help other people... to give of their time, without pay, for the sake of others, freely? Interestingly enough, Christians disproportionately volunteer more than any other group in our society for the sake of others. When we freely give our time, and money, and effort,

and commitment to help the very ones Jesus spoke of that day, we too live out the great reversal. We become God's agents of blessing. And how can we not, when a very part of God – God's own Son – pulled the greatest reversal of all for us!

Christ's great reversal for us was the most subversive thing to happen to humanity. Going with the flow in our society can mean getting ahead, being eager for advancement and gain. Be someone, be remembered. Focus on what you want and let the world go where it may. And as the bumper sticker used to say, "And the one who dies with the most toys wins". But the more we appreciate the great reversal of Christ – that the Son of God would take on human form, trading eternity and accepting death for us -- the more we come to appreciate our own need to turn. For the One whom we have been searching for, the one who represents a deeper meaning in life, the one who answers the longings of our hearts, is the One who walks past us and the crowd in the opposite direction. Paul wrote that this reversal in our lives produce different qualities – what he called fruit of the Spirit. Living the life of the great reversal produces: "joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, love" (Galatians 5: 22-23). The more those fruit appear in our lives, the more we have become part of Christ's great reversal.

If you take the Christian faith down to its essence, it really comes down to this. The Christian faith is about growing in our appreciation of how God turned everything upsidedown through the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we come to appreciate this in deeper and deeper ways, our lives will change and continue to change. So in the midst of the hardships and challenges of life, we will see and celebrate God's blessings. And we will become, more and more, God's agents of blessings.