

## THE UPSIDE DOWN UNIVERSE

*a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 28, 2016  
Based on Philippians 2:3-11, Matthew 18:1-4, Mark 10:35-45*

This sermon is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Ten Truths that Change Life,” during which we have been highlighting central Biblical truths that are transformational when we truly take hold of them. One of the themes that emerges in this process is the fact that Biblical truths move contrary to conventional attitudes. This is a major aspect of how Biblical truths change life—they open up whole new ways of thinking and living.

It is similar to how scientific truths function. I noted at the outset how the theme of this series is based on the physics course at Kent State called “Seven Ideas that Shook the Universe.” New scientific ideas have often served to completely shake up our understanding of the universe. People once thought that the sun revolves around the earth; the idea that the earth revolves around the sun ran totally against longstanding conventional thinking and ultimately revolutionized our view of the universe.

Biblical truths function in a similar way—they revolutionize how we understand and approach life. But there is a fundamental difference between Biblical and scientific truths with regard to how those truths take hold in human life.

Scientific truths can take hold within humanity as a whole, so that the entire human race progresses over time to new scientific understandings. This happens because scientific truth deals with knowledge about the entire physical universe, and it is thus cumulative, with one generation able to build upon the discoveries of the past.

But Biblical truth deals with spiritual issues, matters of the human heart and soul, and thus progress in spiritual understanding must happen within every individual. Key spiritual truths may become particularly clear within the flow of history—we see spiritual truth revealed with ultimate clarity in Jesus—but the spiritual journey for human beings is not cumulative. It is not as though each generation is more spiritual than the last. Rather each person must come, within his or her own heart, to spiritual insight and transformation and growth. This is why old science textbooks are obsolete, but Biblical stories and passages are ever current, because when it comes to spiritual and moral truth, every human being in every age confronts same basic questions and issues and is challenged in the same way. Each person must recognize, respond to, and be changed by God’s truth.

Today we are considering a fundamental shake-up that occurs in a person’s life when God’s truth genuinely takes hold. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

There’s a story about a newly elected politician in Washington, D.C., who was getting oriented to the capital by an elder senator. At one point, the two of them were standing on the banks of the Potomac, when the senator pointed out an old deteriorating log that was floating by. The old-timer said, “This city is like that log out there.” The fledgling politician asked, “How’s that?” The senator came back, “Well, there are probably more than a thousand grubs, ants, bugs and critters on that old log as it floats down the river. And I imagine every one of them thinks that he’s steering it.”

That story illustrates a key aspect of our human condition that we have seen in this sermon series—that people want to exalt themselves, consider themselves significant, and grasp for greatness. We saw this in the opening chapters of Genesis in the story of the Garden of Eden, where the fundamental temptation for Adam and Eve is the temptation to try to be “like God.” [*“If you eat the fruit of this tree,” said the serpent, “you will be like God.” Genesis 3:5*] Human beings continually want to “make themselves like God”; indeed the desire for greatness can be seen across every facet of human behavior.

Why do people want enormous houses and big yachts and all sorts of expensive stuff, when the more stuff you have, the more you have to take care of and fix and clean? The real driver behind the quest for great possessions is not that these things can make people happier. It is that they make people feel significant. If I have a grand house and a grand boat and grand car, I feel grand. It is part of the desire for self-exaltation.

Why is it that when people make charitable gifts today, they so often want recognition? The gift would do just as much good if no one knew where it came from. But people want their name in a publication or their name engraved somewhere or, better yet, their name on whole building. It is because recognition makes me feel grand. It is part of the desire for self-exaltation.

Why is it that people strive to be known—whether it is kids in school who want to be popular, or people striving for celebrity or some element of fame? You can enjoy life more if you are not in the limelight. But people want the spotlight—again out of the desire for self-exaltation.

But our story of the log in the Potomac—with bugs all imagining themselves steering the log—illustrates the folly of this pattern of grasping after greatness. No matter how high and mighty people try to make themselves—in their own eyes or in the eyes of others—the reality is that we are all tiny mortal creatures, who occupy a minute place in a current of time that we do not control.

But human grasping after glory is not only an exercise in folly; it also ends up bringing serious damage to human life. In the story of the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve seek to become like God, the result is that they become alienated from God. They subsequently give birth to their sons, Cain and Abel. One day Cain becomes angered because his offering is not acclaimed by God as much as Abel’s. Cain cannot stand being a peg lower than his brother Abel, so he attacks and murders Abel. The story illustrates how human beings, in the drive to exalt themselves, inevitably fall into envy and hatred, profoundly alienated not only from God but also from one another. We see this repeatedly in our world today. Thus the human quest after self-aggrandizement ends with humans becoming . . . not gods, but brutes.

In sharp contrast to that human story at the beginning of Genesis stands the passage that we heard a few moments ago from Philippians two. Listen again to these words:

“Though he was in the form of God, Christ did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:6-7)

Jesus Christ is the reversal of what takes place in the Garden of Eden. Christ was one with God. But in a precise counter movement to what we see in Adam and Eve, Christ does not grasp after that equality with God, but he empties himself, embarks on a path of servanthood, and enters the world in human form. And note what kind of form it was in which Christ entered the world—the form of a poor Hebrew infant, born in a stable, laid in a manger, a child who would grow to maturity in the obscure village of Nazareth, who as a man would become an itinerant preacher in the disdained land of Palestine, and who would finally would be put to an ignominious death on a cross. Christ sought after none of the elements of greatness that are so sought after in our world today.

Christ thus completely shakes up our typical human values. He demonstrates, in fact, throughout his ministry, a thoroughgoing reversal of values. Human beings continually strive after wealth. But Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20) Human beings love power. But Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5) Human beings are continually attacking one another to try to advance their position. But Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9) More than once Jesus encapsulates that pattern of reversal in the phrase, “The first will be last, and the last first.” (Matthew 19:30, 20:16)

We can see this whole theme with particular clarity in the gospel stories we heard this morning. In Matthew 18, the Scripture reports that “the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1) Notice the perpetual human desire for greatness! The disciples have been following Jesus, but their desire for self-exaltation has not changed—they now want to know who will be the greatest in God’s kingdom. “Jesus,” the story continues, “called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’” (Matthew 18:2-4)

Jesus calls for a reversal—a complete transformation—of our typical human perspective and goals. It is humility, rather than the drive for self-exaltation, which brings us into the kingdom of God.

This ties in directly with the Biblical truths that we have considered in recent weeks. We have noted that it is when we recognize our need for God that we become receptive to God’s salvation. It is when we see that we are sinners, who fall short of God, and that we are in spiritual trouble, unable to save ourselves—it is then that we can turn to God in faith, so as to receive God’s gift of salvation. Thus our spiritual humility opens us up to be uplifted by God’s saving power.

Jesus then calls us to have the same kind of humility in how we approach all of life. Humility does not mean that we think poorly of ourselves. It means that we understand clearly where our worth lies. We don’t have to exalt ourselves to try to give ourselves some sort of artificial self-worth. Rather God gives us worth, by claiming us as His children and by sending Jesus to us to make us one with God and heirs of God’s eternal kingdom. We may be small mortal creatures, floating precariously on a current

of time, but through Christ we are embraced by God and given a place of real significance as God's people.

So instead of vainly trying to lift ourselves up, we can receive the value that Christ places upon us. Then, secure in the grace and love of God, we can follow in the way of Jesus, knowing that the pathway to real life is to be found not in self-exaltation but in self-giving, sharing the grace and love of God with others.

So Paul urges us in our Philippians passage, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others more highly than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." [Phil. 2:3-5]

This whole message is perhaps most memorably expressed in the other gospel story we heard this morning, where James and John ask to be seated at the right and left hand of Jesus in his glory—once again we see the human desire for greatness—and the other disciples grumble about it—once again we see the human propensity to fall into envy and jostling for position. Jesus responds by referring to the continual human quest after greatness [*Jesus said, "The Gentile rulers lord it over others . . . Mark 10:42*], and then he says, "But it is not to be so among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you must be a servant . . . for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10: 43:45)

The disciples ultimately got the point. Following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, they went out into the world in servanthood. They began to live, as Paul would say, with the mind of Christ, [*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Phil. 2:5*] devoting themselves to be instruments of God's grace. They made such an impact that it was finally said of them in the book of Acts, "These are the people who have been turning the world upside down." (Acts 17:6)

"Turning the world upside down" is a good summation of what God does in every age. In the Old Testament, Egypt was the grandest empire of all, yet God worked through the obscure people of Israel to bring about God's plan of salvation. In the New Testament, Rome had achieved a whole new level of grandeur, and yet again God worked through an obscure preacher in the remote province of Palestine. And when the empire put that preacher to death on a cross, God brought about the greatest act of turning things upside down, as God raised Jesus from the dead; and the cross—once a symbol of disgrace and death --- became symbol of salvation and life. God turns things upside down. As Jesus said, "Those who exalt themselves are humbled, and those who humble themselves are exalted." (Matthew 23:12, Luke 14:11)

So Christ comes to us today to shake up our perspective, our values, and our goals, in the same way that Christ did with the first disciples. Christ draws us away from that vain human effort to try to climb the ladder of the universe; for Christ came down the ladder of the universe to give himself for us and all humanity. When we receive Christ as Lord and Savior, then we are moved, as Paul said, to "be of the same mind." We are empowered to go out into the world in the love and mercy of God to reach out to others as servants of God. Transformed by Christ, we can represent the true values of God's Kingdom, and so we become people today who are turning the world upside down.