

“From Where I Stand”

Matthew 6:24-34

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In our Thursday morning Bible study we have been focusing on the parables. One of the first questions asked in the group was, what’s the definition of a parable? I said the definition I like best is – parables are stories or sayings that turn our world upside down.

It’s an odd definition, not very literary, but then the biblical parables weren’t meant to be literary, they were meant to be formative. Jesus taught by use of parables to shape and form the way people view the world and to shape behaviors. When Jesus said “the first shall be last and the last shall be first”, or “what is wise in the world is foolish in God’s sight”, he is turning our views and behaviors upside down, or inside out, or how ever you want to express these reversals.

One purpose or aim of our Christian faith and teachings is to create a perspective within us such that we will see life in ways that are consistent with God’s hope and love. This is not an easy task because there are a great number of perspectives bandied about, and many of them claim to be consistent with God’s hopes and loves. There are not only varying perspectives of those perspectives there are varying applications of those perspectives. I would say it requires diligence, regular reflection and a community of faithful people in order to keep sorting out the perspective that Jesus was creating in people. This is particularly true when what Jesus is doing is turning our world upside down.

This past week I led the Wednesday worship service at the Dunn County Health Care Center. Before I figured out what I was going to do for the service I tried to remember and visualize who would be there, and then I tried to think about what Jesus’ good news would sound like to them.

Almost every person who comes to the Health Care Center services is in a wheel chair, many of them can’t hear or see well, and most of them have other disabilities. Some of them have told me that they feel like worn out or broken

vessels. My dad used to say these things and then he would wonder what he was good for.

When I led the service this last week I told them an Indian story I had heard. It was about an Indian man who had to walk a mile to get clean water for his home. He had a yoke that he'd place on his shoulders with a water jug tied to each end. He would walk to the community well, fill his two jugs and walk home.

At some point one of the jugs developed a crack in it and it trickled water all the way back to the man's home. By the time he arrived the one jug was half empty. The story goes that after a few years of leaking water along the path, the cracked jug told the man it felt horrible that it could not hold the water. The man told the jug not to worry and the jug should watch along the path as he walked the next day. The jug did as the man instructed and when they reached home the jug commented on the beauty of the path. The man pointed out the flowers along the one side and how there weren't any flowers on the other side. The man told the cracked jug that he had planted the flowers on the one side soon after the jug began to leak. He thought he would take advantage of the jug's leaking water so he planted flowers to beautify his path and home. He told the jug he smiles everyday as he walks along the path.

After I told the story, one of the people at the service commented that we are all a bunch of cracked pots. We laughed when she said it and everybody seemed less tense about our frailties. It was a good moment, a grace filled moment.

The story about the water jug helped provide perspective. Instead of people wondering of what good they were, as if they weren't good for anything, they seemed to actually wonder of what good they are. Their perspective had been turned upside down.

Much of what I studied in my college and seminary years was in the field of sociology. I remember studying a concept called "symbolic interaction" several times over the years. Symbolic interaction has to do with things only meaning what we subjectively say they mean. Not very clear at this point probably. The illustration one of my professors used was to take an old felt eraser that he used on the big slate chalkboard at the front of the class. First he took the black, fuzzy eraser and erased some words on the board and turned to us and said, "I suppose

you think this is an eraser, but it's not." He then put the eraser on his desk and put his coffee cup on top and said "it's really a coaster." The point he was making is that the black felt object could be anything a person decided it was. And this is true for much of our lives, things are what we say or imagine them to be. While we may get some basic information about an object, a situation or an idea, in the end we decide according to our experience and beliefs what something means, and what it means can change when our beliefs and experiences change. Even though the eraser was made to be an eraser it did serve very well as a coaster, so maybe it is a coaster.

What we think and say about what is happening in our lives and world is shaped by our experience and beliefs, and we can't help but understand that experience and even biology will cause people to see things differently.

We have lots of phrases that acknowledge our different perspectives and places in life. People will say, "From where I stand" the world looks like this. Perhaps the most powerful event that illustrated this was when the American astronauts stood on the moon and look at earth and saw swirling cloud, incredible blue waters and the absence of national boundaries. They saw the earth as one living organism and they were forever changed by that experience.

To say "From where I stand" is both a remarkable way of saying this is my perspective, but it is not the only perspective, or it can convey the horrible notion that one's perspective is the only perspective worth considering.

Balancing and directing our limited perspectives is much of what our faith addresses. At a minimum our Christian faith instructs us to walk a mile in someone else's shoes in order to expand our compassion. Biblical stories like the one about the rich man and Lazarus are offered so that the plight of the poor and hungry might become a concern of those who are rich.

Our faith teaches us how to be more open to God's ways of hope and love. In our gospel passage this morning Jesus says clearly, "No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and money." But then he goes on and instructs people saying, "I tell you, don't worry about your life, what you will eat, drink or wear, God knows you need these things and has provided for them."

We can and should wrestle with what it means to not worry what we will eat, drink and wear, and how it is that God provides what is needed, but the reason Jesus teaches us not to worry is that he knows worry, fear and anxiety is at the root of why we end up serving money instead of God. Jesus knew that people who are in fear for their own lives and the lives of their families, have a difficult time seeing others and the world as their brothers and sisters. A central argument people make for keeping guns unregulated in our country is that people have a right to defend themselves against intruders and thugs. Even though studies show that more guns actually increase levels of violence in our country, because people are fearful, or made to feel fearful, they want to thwart any attempt to regulate the sale of guns.

Jesus knew that people who are afraid, anxious and worried are more easily manipulated and are less able to gain a greater perspective on life. So he says to all who would listen, “don’t worry about your life ... seek God’s kingdom first and all that you need will come to you.”

The biases of Jesus’ teachings always include reducing our fears and reducing the influence and concern for money, and promoting a larger perspective that considers the plight and needs of the common and forgotten people as fully as those who are in positions of power and wealth. Jesus reveals God’s ways and kingdom to us, and what he reveals is that more and more people are invited to the table, more and more people are considered valuable, more and more people live in less fear and with greater compassion.

Though we can say, “from where I stand this is how the world looks,” Jesus consistently calls us to hear other people’s voices not because we fear what might happen if we don’t , but because we serve God’s ways of love and hope by doing so. Our world and lives become stronger and more compassionate when we value cracked pots as much as jugs that seem to have no flaws.