

November 20, 2016

TEXT: Luke 23

TITLE: The View

By Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Perspective is everything. Advertising executive Rory Sutherland makes this case, arguing that happiness depends not on specific circumstances themselves but how we view those circumstances—*from a quiet moment at a party to the bailout of Greece's economy*. Sutherland argues that when we try to solve a problem in our lives or in the world, we should not only invest in quantifiable ideas—but that we should explore “psychological solutions”: solutions that increase satisfaction but which may cost less. He says:

An example of a great psychological idea: The single best improvement in passenger satisfaction on the London Underground per pound spent came when they didn't add any extra trains nor change the frequency of the trains, (but) they put dot (a) matrix display board on the platforms (with a countdown clock, letting you know when the next train would arrive). Because the nature of a wait is not just dependent on its numerical quality, its duration, but on the level of uncertainty you experience during that wait. Waiting seven minutes for a train with a countdown clock is less frustrating and irritating than waiting four minutes, knuckle-biting going, "When's this train going to (damn well) arrive?"¹

Perspective shapes our reality. Our particular point of view informs our overall worldview—how we give meaning to people, places, things and events that shape our life.

Margaret Atwood explores perspective in a short story she wrote for the Iowa Review called *Bread*. She invites her readers to imagine a piece of bread—to find its location in the kitchen on the counter; to picture the knife used to slice it, and even where the knife was from. She invites readers to taste the butter and honey and peanut butter that coat the bread, and the honey dripping onto your fingers.

Then she invites her readers to imagine bread from the perspective of someone experiencing famine. Bread is utterly significant on the mind of one in the famine—tangibly present in its absence. The bread is just as real, perhaps with even greater meaning to the one who doesn't have it.

Finally, she takes the reader into a prison cell, and to the solitary slice of bread that for a moment transports the prisoner back into their kitchen for just a moment—that unattainable vision of home becoming a form of torture unto itself.²

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/rory_sutherland_perspective_is_everything/transcript?language=en

² Atwood, Margaret, “Bread.” *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981):7-8. Web Available at <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview/vol12/iss2/4>.

A countdown clock. A loaf of bread. A November snowfall. Even a presidential election. All of these aspects of everyday life hold different meanings based on one's point of view. These details of everyday life shape our realities in different ways as we interpret their significance based on our personal perspectives.

This morning we gather in worship and hear a Gospel lesson that might seem out of place. For those of us who were here last week, or who heard Pastor Randy's sermon online, we may be acutely aware that we are going backward. Last week we were moving forward, walking along the road to Emmaus with two disciples and the Risen Christ. Today, we have gone backward, to the scene of the cross.

And frankly we are here because of the Revised Common Lectionary. It has assigned us this text for *this* Sunday—which in and of itself may seem a bit odd. Easter is months away. We have Thanksgiving in just a few days—and a feast following this service—and Advent and Christmas after that. The story is out of psychically out of place in the liturgical story of Christ's birth and death and resurrection and ascent.

And it even seems out of place thematically. Today the church celebrates Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the church calendar, and we know that the cross is not the end of the story. *Why stop here?* Furthermore, if Christ the King Sunday extends an invitation to us to remember the divinity of Christ as we prepare to journey to Bethlehem to celebrate the vulnerable humanity of Christ, why go to the cross?

Our gospel lesson for today offers us an exercise in perspective. As we look to the divinity of Christ, we are invited to do so through the lens of the cross. We are reminded that we can't focus on the glory without first witnessing the shame. Our gospel points out that Christ's kingship is different than paradigms of worldly rule to which we have grown accustomed, and those to which the people of Jesus' time would have come to expect—rule that relied on the power of money, media, and yes, sometimes, lineage—possessions and qualities that were far out of Christ's reach. In the reign of Christ, we see a different way.

Our text invites us to explore the points of view of some unnamed characters: soldiers harassing Jesus, two criminals being crucified alongside Christ. We get to hear intimate conversations: Jesus praying to his Father seeking forgiveness for those who are torturing him, and the famous exchange between Jesus and his fellow prisoners.

From this perspective, we see Christ's death as more than an execution of an innocent man. And we see clearly that this text will not be the end of the story. We *do* get to glimpse the divinity of Christ even in his most humble human moment. As he suffers and dies on the cross, we see that he ushers in the Kingdom of God, even still: loving the sinner, extending mercy to the suffering, engaging in the Triune God's redemptive work even when it cost him so much. One commentator writes:

This passage of the Bible takes us by the hand and gives us the surprising news: Christ is the highest, and he has to suffer awfully. Both fit together in the event of the Savior.

The Lord above all lords is exactly the same one who was humbled on the cross; no other is the Lord...Conversely, this man who is beaten and driven into death has more power than all those who sit in positions of authority and who have forced down so many men and women.³

We hear this story of the vulnerability of the Savior mightily aware that *we too are vulnerable*. Sin and suffering still make headline news. We have grown accustomed to rhetoric all around us in which others are taunted and debased—even the *innocent*. And sometimes it feels like the world in which we live is filled with fear—whether we have been *encouraged to fear the other, or whether we fear the one who will name us as “other” ourselves*. We drink power smoothies and say our prayers, but we know too well the reality of everyday injustices and doctor’s phone calls and life’s multiple demands. Life is beautiful. But sometimes, too, life is hard.

Into the divides in our nation and our world; into our fears and our suffering; into our wounds and our worries we get this message today: *Christ came to save*. Christ came to save the sinner and the sinned against; the least and the lost. Christ came to save the most horrible and horrified parts of our humanity and clothe us with his righteousness.

This is the surprising message of the gospel once more: We celebrate a divine king whose power is made perfect in his weakness. We worship a God whose greatest expression of Divinity was to take on human flesh and dwell among us. We give glory to a God who though perfect took on our sin that we might know mercy and forgiveness. We praise the living God who overcame the sting of death for us by *dying* that we might have life.

God sure has a way of mixing things up! God does not conform to the ways of the world, but transforms the world, continually, by grace. This is good news for those who see the best in everyone and for those of us who have grown weary with the way people hurt each other. This is good news for the marginalized, the brokenhearted and the sinful alike. Christ reorients us, shows us a new way, CALLS us to be a living witness to his reign of justice and peace and love.

Christ shifts our perspective—our whole point of view - over and over again. Although we are sinners, Christ calls us to see the world through the eyes of the redeemed. Although we are mortal, Christ calls us to see the world through the lens of immortality. Although we may be on the margins, Christ welcomes us. Although we may despair over things that hurt us in life, Christ invites us to see things through eyes of hope, promising to be with us always.

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

This is the reality of our lives. This is the promise of our faith. This is the reason we gather in worship. Our story is rewritten in Christ's story.

Our challenge is to allow this renewed perspective to truly change our lives. It needs to really sink in. May we reflect this topsy-turvy point of view that points to God's reign in Christ in simple acts of forgiveness, truth-telling, and peacemaking. May the good news impact our willingness to extend mercy, our ability to find the courage to stand up for the marginalized, our effort to love even our enemy.

The celebration of Christ the King helps us to put our stories into perspective. It allows us to claim the reality of Christ's reign of justice, peace and love even when the fullness of its truth cannot be seen in every nook and cranny of our lives. And it allows us to persevere knowing that the truth of our pain, of our sinfulness, of our woundedness, of our despair is not the *absolute* truth in our lives.

As we celebrate today, we give thanks that the truth of God's redemptive love for us in Christ is the context for the final chapter of our stories—and is the lens through which our entire story has meaning.

As one person writes:

Here, at the end of the Christian year, we might say of this final reading from Luke that the leaders, soldiers, and first thief all live in ordinary time, where the powers of violence determine events and death is the last word; but the second thief lives already in the reign of Christ. If we can see this, we might also see—as thick darkness falls over this sad scene (v. 44)—a far, faint light rising from the dawning of this realm, a place as calm and refreshing as the garden called paradise.⁴

May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).