

Sermon for Sunday, September 25, 2016 Holy Comforter, Richmond
“A World Turned Upside Down”

The Rev. Dr. Mary B. Thorpe

For the past few weeks we've been hearing a series of teachings and parables. We've heard about healing on the Sabbath. We've heard about invited poor people to our table rather than worrying about how close to the host we get to sit. We've heard about how we need to turn our back on familial relationships. We've heard about lost coins and sheep. We've heard about the shrewd but dishonest manager. We've heard about a poor beggar at the rich man's gate getting rewarded and the rich man having an unpleasant surprise at the other side of eternity.

A whole laundry list of teachings...what's the common thread?

It's a world turned upside down. That's the thing about Jesus' teachings. He seemingly never goes to the expected place in his teachings. He takes the conventional wisdom – even the conventional religious wisdom of the day – and upends it. Not surprisingly, that makes people uncomfortable, because we like to think we know how things work and what being a good and righteous person looks like.

I've had a week of uncomfortable-ness. My world was turned upside down. I was called to jury duty.

Now I know that it's our civic duty to do it. I know that I'm not special and don't get a bye on doing it. I know all that. But my schedule is horrific. There's an endless stream of work in my in-box and voice mail, and I can barely keep up.

So I wore my collar to the courthouse in hopes that it would give me a pass. After all, wouldn't the attorneys believe that I would be too bound by religious beliefs to be a good juror? Wouldn't one side think that I would be an angel of mercy and the other think I would be an avenging angel, so either of them might say I couldn't serve?

You know the saying. You make a plan and God laughs.

The one trial that was starting on Monday was a civil trial. They needed nine jurors. There were almost 50 of us. "Piece of cake," I thought. "I'm outta here."

They called 17 people for initial screening. Not me. "Sweet," I thought. "I'm off the hook."

The lawyers quizzed folks. Several were relieved of duty. "Hmm," I thought.

They called a couple of other people to be asked questions. Not me. "Thank goodness," I thought. "That was close."

We broke for lunch, with orders to come back at 1:30. When we reconvened, there was a problem. One of the jurors had not returned from lunch. After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, they went to their list to call one more name.

Mine. Dang it!

Short story: I'm on the jury. I've been on the jury all week. I can't talk about the case, but I can talk, I think, about worlds turned upside down. My world, where my schedule was blown to smithereens. The world of the defendant, who, it goes without saying, had to defend himself. The world of the plaintiff, who filed this case because the plaintiff's world had been turned upside down and thought the defendant was responsible. The world of battalions of lawyers who have to do this for a living, and despite all their carefully constructed strategies, could not predict some of what was said from the stand. The world of my fellow jurors, some of whom were missing work, one of whom was 7 months pregnant, all of whom had other places to be. Even, perhaps, the world of the judge, whose docket of cases was interfered with by this long case – after a full week of testimony, we will finally begin deliberations on Monday – and the times when his administration of this case was interfered with by emergent needs on other cases on his docket.

But even in worlds turned upside down, there is grace. I've met some wonderful people, particularly my fellow jurors, who are a motley crew, but we laugh and share our stories freely in the stuffy little jury room. I've heard moments of tragedy but also moments of deep caring and love in that room and from the

witness stand. I've seen experts turned to mush and ordinary folks be voices of wisdom.

You turn a rock upside down, you might not like what you see. But if you turn the world upside down, you may see things that surprise you more positively.

This is what Jesus has been talking about these past few weeks. If you are stuck in one view of the way things are supposed to be, whether it's that the poor get a lousy deal because their parents sinned, or that the conniving manager gets a bye for his cleverness (remember that one line in last week's gospel that says "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light" – we're supposed to be less shrewd, not more)...if you're stuck in one view of the way things are supposed to be, you aren't looking at the whole picture, you're missing something.

Jesus turns the world upside down so that we can see the whole of God's love for us, the whole of the dark and the light of the world. We are intended to look for the places where we can be bringers of light by seeing things differently. We are not intended to simply move through the right-side-up world like zombies following rules without thinking.

Here's the thing: it's easier to keep the world right-side-up where we think we know what we're supposed to do. It's easier to follow a recipe. But if the only recipe we receive that truly matters is "Add love," it requires that we look in all aspects of the world to see where we're supposed to add it. If we turn the world

upside down, we may see all sorts of places where behaving differently from what our right side up world means that we are the love-bringers. And those who bring us love may be the ones we least expect. It is, after all, upside down world!

I don't know what our jury will decide on this case we've been hearing all week. I don't know what the impact of our decision will be on all who are involved. But I do know this: it turned my world upside down and I saw things I didn't expect to see. I felt God's love in our work and in my personal reflections. There was a moment here or there when I may have been a symbol of God's love – I hope I did that as God would want. As disorienting and disturbing as being in upside down world this week has been, I've learned something of what Jesus asks of us: look and really see. Don't simply follow rules blindly. Questions are not bad things, they are critical. Look for the love. Look for the light. And trust that you will know, through God's Holy Spirit, what you are to do. Both sides of the world need it. Both sides of the world need you.

Amen.