

“Let the Same Mind Be in You: A Sermon from the Sidewalk”

Rooted in Philippians 2:5-11

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I’m holding two tomatoes in my hands, one to your right and one to your left.

As you can see, the tomato on your right is big and beautiful and just the right color for a tomato at this time of year.

And the tomato on your left is little and ugly, half eaten and a little pale for time in August.

My grandpa was a tomato farmer here in Greenville, and sold many home grown tomatoes to many customers along Hudson Road.

One year, he grew 15 tons of tomatoes, 30,000 pounds, and sold them all!

He would be disappointed in me this morning because I bought these tomatoes at the grocery store.

I’m sorry, PePa!

But I do have a loaf of Bunny Bread, a jar of Duke’s Mayonnaise, and some salt and pepper at my house so I can use these tomatoes to make one of the “gourmet”-est of gourmet meals for a South Carolina summer - a tomato sandwich.

So I have that going for me!

Along with these two tomatoes, I’m going to say two words - sovereign and lord.

Sovereign.

When I say that word, which tomato do you think it describes, the one on your right or the one on your left?

Lord.

When I say that word, which tomato do you think it describes, the one on your right or the one on your left?

One of my heroes, St. Oscar Romero, went out to the outskirts of San Salvador in the 1970's.

A person walked up to him and handed him a half eaten tomato.

He leaned toward a Jesuit priest who was standing beside him and whispered, "Why in the world would anyone give me a half eaten tomato?"

"It's his last possession in the world," said the priest. "It's a sign of his love, a gift to you."

In that moment, Romero realized the words sovereign and lord mean something different in the upside down kingdom of God than they do in the world.

He realized that as an archbishop he should resemble the half eaten tomato.

He realized that Jesus resembles the half eaten tomato.

When the Biblical writers write of God, they often use the word LORD, capital L - capital O - capital R - capital D, to distinguish God from the gods who aren't really God, the "little g" gods like political leaders, money, drugs and alcohol - all the people and things who/that think they're sovereign and lord but aren't...who are the big, beautiful tomato and not the little, half eaten one.

Jesus is the little, half eaten tomato.

Jesus is LORD.

Today we'll think about what that looks like, what it means to follow this kind of LORD, what it means to say Jesus is LORD.

God is sovereign, Jesus is LORD, not in the way that empires are sovereign and lord, not with missiles or executive orders or marble monuments. God is sovereign, Jesus is LORD, like a seed in the ground. Like a mustard tree growing up in the cracks of a prison wall. Like a baby born to a poor, brown girl in an occupied land.

[Philippians 2:5-11 - The Upside Down Hymn]

5 The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had:

6 He always had the nature of God,

but he did not think that by force he should try to remain[a] equal with God.

7 Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had,

and took the nature of a servant.

He became like a human being

and appeared in human likeness.

8 He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death—

his death on the cross.

9 For this reason God raised him to the highest place above

and gave him the name that is greater than any other name.

10 And so, in honor of the name of Jesus

all beings in heaven, on earth, and in the world below[b]

will fall on their knees,

11 and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

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[The Mind of Christ vs. the Mind of Empire]

Let this mind be in you. Not the mind of Wall Street. Not the mind of drugs and alcohol. Not the mind of nationalism. Not the mind of domination and power. Not the mind of winning at all costs. But the mind of Christ.

The upside-down kingdom starts here. (Tap your chest) It starts when we stop trying to climb and start choosing to kneel. When we stop hoarding and start sharing. When we stop saying 'me first' and start saying 'you go ahead.' When we say, with our lives, that Jesus is Lord—and not Caesar, not the president, not the dollar, not even ourselves.

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["Jesus Is Lord" — A Dangerous Declaration]

In the days of the Roman Empire, "Jesus is Lord" was not a polite Sunday school phrase. It

was treason. A counter-cultural bomb. Because everyone knew: Caesar was called “Lord.” Caesar was the one people bowed to. Caesar had the legions. Caesar had the power.

But Paul says no. No. (Let your voice rise like gentle thunder) There’s a new Lord in town. And he doesn’t ride in on a war horse—he stumbles in on a donkey. He doesn’t crush his enemies—he forgives them. He doesn’t sit on a golden throne—he hangs on a wooden cross. This Lord kneels to wash feet. This Lord eats with the homeless. This Lord welcomes children and touches lepers and dies between two thieves.

You see why the empire killed him, don’t you?

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[Fannie Lou Hamer and the Upside Down Kingdom]

Listen to this quote from Fannie Lou Hamer:

“There are two things we should all care about: never to forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over.”

She knew something about the upside-down kingdom. Fannie Lou was a Black woman born in Mississippi, the youngest of twenty children. She picked cotton. She faced beatings and bullets and prison cells. But she sang anyway. She marched anyway. She loved anyway. She believed that Jesus was Lord—not Jim Crow, not the sheriff, not the plantation boss. She lived the gospel where it was hardest to live it: on the underside of history.

Some of you know what I’m talking about. Some of you have been beaten too. Pushed out. Locked up. Ignored. You know what it means to follow a crucified Lord. You know what it means to be poor and still praise.

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[Oscar Romero: A Bishop for the Poor]

And there was another one. A priest named Oscar Romero. They made him a bishop down in El Salvador, thinking he’d be quiet. Thinking he’d play it safe. But then he saw the suffering of the poor. He saw the military killing farmers. He saw the empire at work, dressed up in the flag.

And Romero changed. He said, 'A church that does not unite itself to the poor... is not the true church of Jesus Christ.' He preached that the crucified Jesus was alive in the campesinos and the orphans and the widows. He said, 'Stop the repression.' And they shot him in the heart while he was saying Mass.

But let me tell you something. The bullet didn't kill him. The empire never wins in the upside-down kingdom.

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[The Self-Emptying of God]

Paul writes that Jesus emptied himself. That's the word: kenosis in Greek. He let go of power. He poured himself out.

We think power looks like tanks and titles, but Jesus shows us it looks like a mother cradling her hungry baby, like a man sleeping on cardboard but still praying for others, like someone giving away their last dollar and trusting that grace will be enough.

The upside-down kingdom flips the script. In a world obsessed with climbing, Jesus goes down. Down into flesh. Down into death. Down into hell. And from there, he lifts the world.

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[Imitating Christ on the Street Corner]

Let the same mind be in you. (Softer) It means responding to violence with non-violence. It means when the world says 'take,' you say 'give.' It means when politicians shout, 'Make us great,' you say, 'Make us humble.'"

You don't need a pulpit to preach this gospel. You preach it when you share your food stamps. When you sit beside someone who is different than you. When you say no to hatred. When you say yes to hope.

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[The Name Above Every Name]

Paul says that because of Jesus' humility, "God highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name..."

What's the name? (Grin like you already know the answer)

LORD.

Jesus is LORD.

Not Caesar. Not America. Not capitalism. Not even the church when it forgets who it follows. The name that saves is Jesus. The name that frees is Jesus. The name that turns the world upside-down is Jesus.

Jesus is LORD.

And that name isn't magic. It's a way of life. It's a path of descent. It's a love that suffers and rises again.

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[Street Communion]

Juniper pulled out a thermos of lukewarm coffee and a half-empty loaf of bread.

"I know this ain't church like you're used to," he said, "but maybe it's more like the one Jesus started."

He broke the bread again and passed it to everyone. "This is my body," he said. "Broken for the forgotten ones. For the addicts and the dreamers. For the jailbirds and the grandmothers. For the ones nobody notices."

He poured the coffee. "This is my blood," he said. "Poured out in the alleyways and emergency rooms. Spilled in the detention centers and the hospital beds. Shed for the guilty and the shamed. Shed for you."

They ate and drank. And for a moment, the brick wall became an altar. The sidewalk became sacred. And the upside down kingdom of God came near.

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[Closing Word: Jesus Is Still Lord]

I know this world is a mess. I know there are men in suits who claim to be saviors. I know the flag gets wrapped around the cross until it's hard to see Jesus anymore.

But I'm here to remind you. Fannie Lou reminded us. Oscar Romero reminded us. And Paul said it long ago..."

"Jesus is LORD."

And that changes everything.

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[Benediction: The Upside Down Blessing]

May you be blessed with poverty of spirit,
so that the kingdom of heaven becomes your home.

May you mourn deeply,
so that comfort comes like morning light.

May you hunger for justice
until you taste it in bread shared with a stranger.

May you be merciful,
because you've been forgiven again and again.

May your heart be clean,
not perfect, but honest.

May you be peacemakers in a world that worships war.

May you be persecuted for love,
and still sing the songs of freedom.

And may you walk barefoot and blessed,
with Jesus, the upside-down Lord,
into a world that still needs saving.

Sermon Poems/Stories

Pluto

Well, there you are, dear rock, so small, so far,
Way out past moons and dust and dark and cold.
Your shine so faint, like one dim, lost, shy star,
Left off the list, not bright, not found, not bold.

They said you were too meek to count as real,
Too still, too slow, too bare to make the cut.
But I see worth in all the things you feel,
In hearts that drift, in doors the proud ones shut.

You turn just right, with tilt and hush and grace.
You keep your beat, your path, your truth, your name.
You show that not all kings must race or chase.
Some rule the space, and not for gold or fame.

So let them scoff. I walk with you, old friend,
A small, round soul loved to the very end.

One thing I love about Triune Mercy Center is its diversity.

Here's why.

My great-grandma Grice lived close to me when I was growing up in Taylors, SC.

My grandma, mom and I took her grocery shopping at the Winn Dixie on Wade Hampton Boulevard every Friday and then took her to lunch at Burger King. If I recall those times

correctly, she'd put on the Burger King crown to make me laugh. She was a beautiful person.

She grew up as a white woman in a mill village in Taylors called Southern Bleachery smack dab in the middle of the Jim Crow south where Black folks were treated like second class citizens and somehow less than human than folks who had white skin.

Her culture taught her to be prejudiced and racist, and it's hard to turn your back on the things your culture tries to teach you.

But she did.

What an amazing person she was.

Whenever someone used demagogic language about Black folks, or tried to dehumanize them in any way, she would say in her soft-spoken, straightforward way, "Well, look here, we're going to have to learn to live together here on Earth because we're going to be living together in heaven."

Wow! How lucky am I to have had those words planted in the deep parts of my heart?

I'm sure her life and words are one reason I have an empathetic heart today and work hard with my hands and feet and words to build a more diverse, equitable and inclusive world for everybody.

She taught me that schools, neighborhoods, cities, states, countries and the world itself are better off if they're filled with people who don't look alike, live alike, think alike, believe alike or love alike.

She taught me that being around people who aren't like me makes me a bit more of who God wants me to be.

She taught me that being around people who aren't like me makes me a more empathetic person.

And empathetic people are the only ones who can heal our broken world.

So as I stand behind the pulpit during this morning's worship service at TMC, I think about

my great-grandma.

I look out over this congregation of beautiful people and see Black folks, White folks, poor folks, rich folks, unhoused folks, housed folks, folks who didn't make it past grade school, folks who made it all the way to their PhD's, trans folks, LGBTQ folks, straight folks.

If she was been sitting beside us she'd lean close to your ear and whisper, "Well, we're living together here at Triune Mercy Center so we'll we'll surely be ready for the neighborhood of God in heaven."

Brother Juniper walked barefoot at sunrise beside Triune Mercy Center, the sky still brushing the city in soft reds, yellows and blues. His patched brown t-shirt hung loose, and his feet whispered along the cracked sidewalk, which was already warm with the promise of August heat. Beside him walked Manuel, his friend from Berea, an undocumented man with calloused hands and a quiet laugh who worked seven days a week at a dusty little garage behind a pawn shop and a gas station that never had the cheapest gas.

Juniper listened more than he spoke. He always did when he was with Manuel.

"I fixed up that old Toyota for Miss Fannie Lou last week," Manuel said, a smile tugging at the corners of his face. "Didn't charge her. Just changed the oil, patched the tire, gave it a prayer and a full tank."

Juniper nodded. He saw it, how Manuel lived in the upside down kingdom without needing to name it. No trumpet sounds. No selfies. Just goodness in grease-stained hands.

"Didn't charge her," Juniper repeated softly. "You're the richest poor man I know."

Manuel chuckled and kicked a bottle cap into the curb. "Can't take the money with you, hermano. But you can take an open heart."

They stopped at the corner by the wall where Juniper usually prayed. And there, pushing up gritty and golden through the concrete, was a single dandelion. Manuel knelt beside it, touched it gently, reverently.

"Look at this little rebel," he said. "Doesn't know it's not supposed to grow here."

Juniper stared at Manuel as if seeing him for the first time. He thought of how Manuel worked without papers but with honor, how he repaired broken engines and broken people alike, how he gave away more than he kept, how he lived in shadows but carried his own light.

“You’re the dandelion,” Juniper said. “Rooted deep in hard places. Blooming where you weren’t invited. Breaking concrete with beauty.”

Manuel stood, brushed off his hands, and laughed again. “Nah, hermano. I just fix cars.”

But Juniper would remember. Juniper, the barefoot scribe of the streets, would write it all down, how love hides in plain sight, how the kingdom comes in overalls and oil stains, how the sun always rises on the just and the undocumented.

And how sometimes, the hero walks beside you in silence.