

Kirby Lawrence Hill  
February 17, 2019  
Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Luke 6:17-26

Abington Presbyterian Church

## TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Peter Graeff grew up in the congregation in Maryland that I served before coming here. He was an agricultural economist by training. After college, he went into the Peace Corps, serving in Latin America. At some point as a young adult, he visited Haiti and fell in love with the people there. He worked for several non-profits there so that he could serve the people who lived in what is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> At times he worked in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and at times he worked on La Gonave, an island where most people had no electricity or running water. In his service to the people of Haiti and to his Lord, he used that knowledge of what could grow in certain or uncertain conditions, and how it would benefit a gardener or farmer or the greater community with crops that would provide good nutrition. I'm sure at various times in particular locations that included rice and beans, corn, mangoes, and various vegetables.

But Peter's green thumb was really put to best use in helping other things to grow. As an expression of faith, he planted all kinds of figurative seeds. He got out his seed packs and planted a row of deep care, a row of vivid imagination, a row of love for education, a row of vibrant community, and a row of broad peace. He nurtured the young plants as they began to spring up. He constantly weeded out that which would threaten the possible yield. His diligent efforts led to amazing growth and eventually to a bumper crop of hope. Some would say that the figurative soil where he was working was not fertile for such work, but Peter's green thumb and big heart, by God's grace, were somehow more than enough for the people to have the literal and figurative crops that were so needed. He did this work because he so valued each and every person with whom he worked, giving special and needed care to those who were the poorest of the poor. His advocacy for the poor when he was at home in his congregation in Maryland, inspired others to rethink their views and their actions.

Early in the Gospel of Luke, we hear indication that the status quo is being turned upside down when Mary, filled with a pregnant hope, proclaims in poetic fashion that God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”<sup>2</sup> Then the One who is identified by an angel as the Messiah, the Lord, is born into an impoverished condition. Something clearly different is going on. As Mary’s son, this child named Jesus becomes an adult, there are stories of him challenging expected norms, welcoming those who were hated, and healing those who were considered outcasts. We then hear some of his teachings to both Jews and Gentiles that had gathered around him. It is an expression of blessings and a statement of woes, that in that setting would have been quite surprising. The four blessings are similar to some of the Beatitudes found in Matthew, those statements that are beautifully painted in the archway here. Whoever decided about what would be painted in this archway decided to go with Matthew’s version, which does not have the corresponding statements of ‘woe.’ I’m not complaining about that decision at all, because Luke’s version is frankly a bit harder to explain. That’s in part because Luke’s combo of blessings and woes turns common values upside down.

What most folks thought was right side up was a common understanding that those who were poor and hungry, those who had reason to mourn were suffering because God was unhappy with them. Conversely, it was understood that those who were rich and full and laughing had received such gifts from God as a sign of divine favor. There are some Christian circles today where similar beliefs seem to still be in place. Since the understanding was that the poor and hungry were in that condition as an expression of God’s judgment, then those who had means could tell themselves they had no responsibility to assist those in need.

But Jesus indicates that he has quite a different understanding. He was telling the poor that they were so beloved by God that God’s reign and heart belonged to them. Yet he was telling the rich that if they thought things were more important than people, if they worshiped at the altar of materialism, then they would be missing out on the possibilities of a truly rich life. Jesus told the hungry that God so cared about their needs that they should be filled with hope even before they would be filled with food. But to those who were currently full, who were focused solely on

their own gratification, he indicated that they would at some point experience their own type of emptiness. To those who were weeping, who in compassion put themselves in touch with others who were suffering, they would come to know deep meaning and joy. But to those who laughed derisively and put down the lower class as a source of entertainment, they would have reason to mourn their own lives at some future time. The last pairing began with telling the crowd that they would be blessed if people hated, reviled, and excluded them on account of them living out their faith, that they would come to know the very blessings of heaven. And woe to those who only told others delicious little lies, sharing with them only what they most wanted to hear – those people would be compared with false prophets who worked counter to God's good intent.

I don't think I need to outline for you how the rich and those who are conspicuous in their consumption get portrayed in our society. Neither do I need to spell out some of the negative stereotypes used to characterize those who are poor and hungry. Jesus' love and compassion, his dedication to the deeply meaningful and the wondrously possible turned things upside down – his words and his spirit still do.

Not all of us are called to live and work among the poor, but all of us who are followers of Christ cannot be satisfied with the status quo of vast economic inequities or the status quo of derisive attitudes that block what would be effective initiatives. Jesus cherished those who went uncherished by others, and in so doing he shows us a life that received and shared God's blessings in ways that turns common thoughts and beliefs upside down.

I'll share a little more about my friend, Peter. When a serious earthquake hit the capital city of Haiti in 2010, his apartment and tens of thousands of other structures were damaged to the extent that they could not be used or repaired. So he joined a large tent city where thousands and thousands lived. Peter had some health concerns, so the church I served sent him funds to find a safe place to live, but as a demonstration of solidarity, he would not move out of his little tent for months and months, until all the others had found a safe place to live. Also, each year, Peter and a Haitian woman named Fifi would team up to put together what was called in

Creole, a Fet Pov, a festival of celebration for the poorest of the poor. When I first began to serve that congregation, I heard that they had been financially supporting that party for years. Frankly, I wondered whether there were not more practical ways to address the needs of the Haitian people. But the more I heard about the counter-cultural celebration, the more I came to understand that such a party that honored those who had no means to ever celebrate anything might just be one of the most faithful ways to share the reality of God's deep love and care.

Jesus celebrated God's love for those who were unloved. He showed there were ample ways to be rich that have little to do with money. He demonstrated there are plenty of ways to live a full life that have nothing to do with one's own appetites. He planted a love in a challenging place that has grown in such a way that it turns the world upside down. I dare say that if we live out similar expressions in our own contexts, we and those with whom we are in contact, will be among those who are blessed. Thanks be to God.

<sup>1</sup><https://naijaquest.com/poorest-countries-in-the-western-hemisphere/>

<sup>2</sup>Luke 1:52-53