

5 November 2023, All Saints
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Reality Turned Upside Down

The Rev'd Michael Thompson, Esq.

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

I had a million reasons not to pursue a call to priesthood. I had finished my academic education – or so I thought. I had been working as an attorney for a decade at that point, and I didn't feel called to stop practicing law. How was I going to do this? Were there people who were lawyers and priests? Even if there were, how was I supposed to complete seminary on top of an already demanding career? Even if I managed to complete seminary, how could I balance legal practice and priestly ministry?

Even if time weren't a concern, completing seminary would require different skills. School always seemed to come easily to me, but, again, it had been a decade since I was last in a classroom. Plus, everyone kept telling me that

seminary was no ordinary academic degree. It required more than just learning facts. It required engaging with my own faith, exploring my own understanding of who God is, and practicing “soft” skills like pastoral care. Law school trained me to think like a lawyer. Could I retool my brain to think like a priest – whatever that means?

Was I even worthy of such a calling? I didn’t (and still don’t) feel especially holy. I’m just a guy who believes that God’s love is so profound that God loves us even at our worst. I’m just a sinner who believes that God’s love is so profound that God is willing to put up with my nonsense – including my resistance to following God’s call.

Even more practically, there was, as there always seems to be, the issue of money. Patrick and I weren’t struggling financially, but could we really afford to add graduate school tuition to our expenses? Could we afford the costs of trips for in-person intensive classes?

Despite my litany of reasons not to start down this path, the Spirit kept calling me. She’s a persistent one. She had determined that the time had come, and she was not going to let me off easily. Even so, I still wouldn’t commit. I decided, though, that I could at least do a little investigating, which I was sure would reveal that all my misgivings were 100% valid. That way, the Spirit

would give up and move on to someone more equipped and more worthy. So, I emailed Edie, the Canon for Ordained Vocations. My questions were simple. Is this a thing people do? Do people become priests while continuing to work in a demanding secular job? Is it even possible to satisfy the requirements?

I was sure Edie would respond with a kindly worded, “Eh. It’s not impossible, but not really something you want to do.” And then the email came back. Uh oh. It is possible. Certainly, this path will bring challenges, but not insurmountable challenges. Well, that threw a wrench in the works.

Still, I didn’t completely give in. Next, I decided that I was called to be a vocational deacon. I can imagine God looking at me incredulously saying, “I have called some people to be deacons, but that’s not what I am calling you to be. Do what you think you want, but I’m not letting up.” This discernment period was deeply enriching for me. I learned about the beauty of diaconal ministry – and I learned that that was not my calling.

God seemed determined to take everything I knew and turn it all upside down. As I explored whether I was called to be a deacon or a priest, God sent me people who patiently held up the mirror so I could see my priestly calling. At each legal job I’ve had, I found support for pursuing my priestly

vocation. Our Bishops, Commission on Ministry, and Standing Committee have all supported and encouraged me down this path. I was gifted early in the process with a wonderful example of bivocational ministry in one of my sponsoring priests, The Reverend Dr. Lisa R. Fortuna. Along the way, I was gifted with even more people who were willing to envision with me what the Church could be as it embraced the gifts of bivocational priests and, more specifically, how my bivocational priestly ministry could be a gift to others and to myself. God sure stacked things up to make it increasingly difficult to say, “No.”

My journey speaks to something that almost innate. Faced with a calling that feels too weighty, we begin to justify our not pursuing that calling with a long list of reasons it won't work. That list usually comes down to some version of there isn't enough time; I don't have the right skills; and I can't afford it. We expect that, faced with our reasons, God (that nagging feeling pulling us) will say, “Oh! I hadn't thought about that. You're right. I'll move on.” That's not how God works.

Today, we commemorate All Saints Day, and our Gospel lesson is, according to Matthew, Jesus' very first sermon in his ministry. In the chapter before, Jesus is tempted after his baptism; beings to proclaim, “Repent for the

kingdom of heaven has come near”; calls his first disciples; and begins teaching and healing the crowds. But this moment, the Sermon on the Mount, is the first time in Matthew where Jesus begins to teach us what God – and what Jesus the Incarnate Word – is all about.

Jesus’ first sermon defies logic. He proclaims that the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are persecuted and reviled are blessed. He even puts their blessing alongside the blessing of the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. Now, come on, Jesus! I’m sure if you asked someone who is poor in spirit, mourning, or persecuted to describe themselves, blessed would not make the list. That’s just the thing, though. God isn’t confined by what we think is possible. In these nine short statements, Jesus reveals to us that God turns our reality, all the things we “know,” upside down. God is not like us. God can see more broadly and more deeply than we ever could.

The Saints of the Church and the saints who have guided us along our journeys of faith know this. They know God as one tells elderly people that they would be the parents of many nations. They know God as one who makes mothers out of women said to be barren. They know God as one who send a man who doesn’t talk good to one of the most powerful people on

Earth to demand freedom for God's people. They know God to be one who leads people through scorching furnaces and saves them from ravenous lions. They know God as one who calls a teenage girl to take up the responsibility of bring God's being into the world. They know God as one who turns our reality upside down.

Like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, the saints whom we remember today know that God does not deal in our reality. God is not limited by our notions of the possible. The saints left us this example: they got out of the way and gave themselves over to God so that God could turn their reality – and ours – upside down. And thanks be to God for that. Our reality tells us that death and sin are unavoidable prisons. Gd turns that reality upside down to give us a salvation that seemed impossible.

You may not have realized it, but this is a stewardship sermon. This is about how we use our time, talent, and treasure. Too often, when God calls us, we come up with a list of reasons to respond, "No." There is never enough time, talent, or treasure. We impose on God the limitations of our reality.

What if we, hearing Jesus declare blessing, instead looked for reasons to say, "Yes"? What if we prioritized God's calling to us and deprioritized our list of reasons why it won't work? What if we gave ourselves into God's care and

took even one step toward God's calling? What if we believed that we do have enough?

God wants to take all that we have and use it to turn our reality upside down. God wants us to have a reality in which the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are persecuted are blessed. We need to get out of the way and join in God's dream. Let's dare to believe in a reality in which we do have enough. Let's dare to believe in a reality in which all are blessed. Let's dare to believe in a reality turned upside down.

In everything we do – in how we invest our time, in how we recognize and use the gifts with which God blesses us, in how we use our resources – we are to look through God's eyes. Our stewardship and our ministry should not be limited by what we think is true. In our stewardship, ministry, and all aspects of our lives, we should dare to dream of a reality turned upside down. When we do that, as the saints did, we can live a reality imbued with the blessing of the One who loved it into being. We can live a reality in which we glorify God by allowing God's power to work in us to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Let God turn your reality upside down.

Amen.