

Reflection: God Turns the Tables In my twenties, I trained as an actor in what was then known as the Ryerson Theatre Department. In our final year, as preparation for the careers on which we were about to embark, professional casting directors were brought in to put us through mock auditions and give us feedback. One such casting director was from CBC television and he put us through the paces of what had been the real casting process for a children's show that was currently on the air. In this children's show, the main characters were animals and the actors themselves were never seen. They wore these huge, full-body animal costumes. Our challenge was to work on the voice and movements of a squirrel - a large, cartoonish squirrel. I felt very good about my audition and waited with bated breath for my evaluation. It came with good news and bad. The casting director said that I had done the best characterization with the best vocal and physical depiction of this big, ol' squirrel BUT that I would never be cast because – get this – I was too pretty. (You have to use your imaginations - this was 50 years and the same number of pounds ago. I kind of resembled a Barbie doll at that time.) Now remember - I would never have been seen! I would have been suffocating inside an encasement of pretend squirrel. Looking back, I wonder if this casting director was actually that consumed with stereotypes or if his message was that the entertainment industry was. Either way, it was ridiculous – and one of my first encounters with image versus truth. I was a character actor trapped in an ingenue body. Other incidents, professionally and personally, led me to understand that it was common to be judged, positively or negatively, based on what I looked like and, by extension, what I appeared to *be* like. Some people liked me for the wrong reasons – all superficial. Others *disliked* me, assuming that I was unintelligent, shallow, conceited, or other clichés around the image I presented physically. Of course, people

who really knew me then were aware that the truth was I was painfully shy and desperately insecure.

However, I was able to use preconceptions to my advantage when having to attend social events. Knowing that how I looked would influence some people in my favour, I found the courage to overcome my shyness to the point where I was able to enter a room of strangers. Granted, I would – and still do – hastily find a corner in which to hide but at least I became willing to attend - nervously perspiring but in attendance.

Image versus truth.

The life and death of Jesus Christ is an example of image versus truth and he himself taught the importance of knowing the difference between the two.

Jesus of Nazareth, the man many were purporting to be the Messiah, died by crucifixion. He was marched through the streets carrying the cross on which he would hang, stripped of his clothing, mocked and degraded and met his death on that cross, a death considered to be one of the most brutal and shameful. In common opinion, not the death of a king and certainly not the death of a Messiah. Jesus definitely didn't fit the image of the Messiah that was expected to wage and win a war against the tyranny of the Romans and return the Jewish people to the glory days they had had under King David. Surely that man would be a military figure. Like fighting like.

Other expectations of a Messiah were of someone who had high social standing, wealth, and power. Born in a stable and the son of a carpenter, Jesus did not fit that bill.

Not only did his worldly appearance and social standing not fulfill most expectations of a Messiah but what he preached could not have been further from that of a warrior king. Rather than a doctrine of retaliation, Jesus professed we should *love* our enemies! Matthew 5: 43-48: “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Unheard of.

And what kind of wimpy messages were these:

“The last shall be first and the first shall be last.”

“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

“It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

Even the disciples, when they first heard these teachings, were amazed as wealth and power were seen as signs of God’s blessing and surely the son of God would be so blessed! Jesus’ life and lessons were blowing preconceptions of a Messiah out of the water.

Jesus taught that power and money were nothing compared to spiritual values. In fact, promoting an *image* of power was revealed to be human weakness, frailty disguised as ego. True strength – spiritual strength – lay in love.

Image versus truth.

False expectations of what a Messiah would look or be like were what the disciples were up against when trying to spread their good news when Jesus was alive, as well as after his death. Ironically, it was the people who *did* believe in Jesus that became a threat to his earthly life. In our reading from Mark today we heard that, when hearing of the incident at the temple, the chief priests and scribes “kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.” What if this Jesus became successful in upending the status quo? Where would *that* land them?

And when they did crucify Jesus, even his followers would have had doubt cast on their beliefs. Could this tortured victim have been the Son of God, the Saviour for whom they had waited? Others, who had doubted all along, would have felt vindicated in their disbelief.

Jesus rejected our human inclination to reject others, teaching instead that all of us are equal in God’s sight. He included women in his circle. He sat with those considered “unclean”. He refused to shun those who society had shunned. And, as a result, he himself was rejected and shunned.

Of course, still in our world today many people, both as individuals and as groups, experience rejection and shunning. Whether one-on-one or in the systems which we have designed, we don’t have to look far to find victims of bullying, of rejection – torture of one kind or another. Mostly now, we’ve learned to be sneaky about our prejudices. We usually don’t admit them out loud - but we act on them. Or, just as bad and more often, we *don’t* act to overturn their influence. Racial attacks are experienced in enforced poverty, marginalization, lack of opportunities, and gun violence. George Floyd died saying, “I can’t breathe.” Marginalized people of all types can’t breathe. My goddaughter is a trans woman and I fear that, God

forbid, she will experience an attack of one kind or another, emotional or physical. Worshippers are being gunned down in synagogues and mosques. To the deranged minds of the shooters, those victims are “the other”. And “the other” is not like me and, therefore, not as good as me and they challenge life as I know it and the false image of my righteousness. The idea that we are all equal is an affront to some individuals and systems. Turning the tables on the status quo is felt to be a terrifying threat.

The worship of undeserved and evil power shows up in the headlines every day: the American singer-songwriter R. Kelly subjugating young girls at his whim, Bill Cosby hiding behind the image of the perfect husband and father while abusing a power he should never have had in the first place. Nobody should have the kind of power these men exercised. The abuser projects a false image and the truth lies hidden.

But the truth of what real power is has been revealed to us in the life of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God turned the tables, literally and figuratively. In anger, Jesus turned over the tables in the market place challenging the accepted norm of practicing commerce in the area of the house of prayer and, by extension, denouncing the worship of money.

But, in actual fact, the expression isn’t “the tables are turned *over*”, it’s “the tables are turned”. It comes from board games like chess or backgammon. The “table” means the board itself. The expression refers to the fact that if you are losing the game the board would have to be turned for you to be in the winning position. So, when the tables *are* turned, those who would have lost, win.

In Jesus, God turned the tables on those who would view worldly status as power, who would see money as wealth, who would cling to expectations built on stereotypes, prejudice, and the status quo.

I was too over-protected and naive to have been a real hippie but I certainly was influenced by the societal revolution begun by them and I don't think it's a stretch to draw comparisons between what Jesus preached and some of what hippies espoused, specifically the breaking down of racial, sexual, and societal barriers. Not surprisingly, it was that era in which the musicals "Godspell" and "Jesus Christ Superstar" were created. Bob Dylan's song, "The Times They Are A-Changin'" served as a plea to those who would cling to the old norms: "Your old road is rapidly agin'.

**Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
for the times they are a-changin."**

And they must still change. And we must still lend a hand – however we can. God dares us to release our fear and enact his loving vision. God challenges us to upend systems of oppression in society and instincts of oppression in ourselves. All movements – positive movements of any kind: causes, campaigns, crusades – are begun by a movement of the heart. And that's where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit inspires us to keep turning the tables against cruelty and complacency, to keep in mind what is merely image and what is true, to know where real value lies.

The same passion that spurred Jesus to overturn those tables is alive in the many, many courageous souls of our time who take action to right wrongs. In 2016, Colin Kaepernick, rather than standing for the national anthem, knelt on the sideline to protest social injustice and police brutality. He took a lot of flak for it but he remained true to his

conscience and his courage was so inspiring that, even without him in the league, some players still kneel during the anthem. That's how the tables get turned.

In 2010, Cindy Bourgeois, now the minister at St. Bartholomew's United Church in Brampton, became the first openly transgender person to be ordained in a mainline denomination in Canada. It was in the *United* Church and one of the many reasons why I am proud to belong to it. The journey to reflect who she truly is was undoubtedly one with many challenges but Ms Bourgeois' accomplishments contributed to a growing understanding and acceptance of those of God's children who we call "trans". *That's* how the tables get turned.

In 2006, Tarana Burke started the "Me Too" movement, giving voice to long-stifled victims of sexual abuse and violence, a nightmare to which she herself had been subject. It became - and still is - a movement that changed for the better the dynamic of personal and professional relationships between men and women. In practice and in law. *That's* how the tables get turned.

God revealed to us in Jesus' tidings of love and hope that would transform – and must still transform - the world. He delivered to us, in the form of a peasant, a message of true power that would be carried through history. What appeared to be a death in humiliation has proven to be an ascent into glory.

Jesus Christ demonstrated how humanity should behave: serving others in humility and grace. This king scoffed at earthly power and showed us that true power lies in the spirit. True power lies in love. This king was not a worldly warrior but a warrior of the soul.

In Jesus, God turns the tables and gifts us with spiritual truth. No images here. Just truth.