

WHAT ARE YOU POINTED TOWARDS?

Serving Jesus in an Upside-Down World | Hebrews 12:2

On this World Communion Sunday – a day when followers of Jesus all over planet Earth gather around one table... the table where we remember the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf... the table where we recover our vision of who we are and are called to represent in this troubled world... the table where we take into ourselves the grace and wisdom we need to make and give the most of life in our times...

As we prepare to come to THIS table, I invite YOU to listen with me to the Word of God. Hear THIS timely summons to all who have the ears to hear and the eyes to see, as it is expressed by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. As you and I live in this dizzying, dazzling, disturbing and disorienting world... **Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2).**

Some years ago, a 29 year-old Air Force captain named Amy Svoboda was practicing high-speed maneuvers over the Arizona desert. She was at the helm of one of those bezillion-dollar, high-tech jet fighters normal people only get to fly in video games. Pulling back sharply on her steering yoke, Captain Svoboda engaged in what she believed would be a steep ascent into the blue skies. For a second or two, she heard the familiar sound of the jet engines screaming. And then, suddenly, they and she EXPLODED into oblivion, as Amy's jet -- traveling at 800 miles per hour -- plowed into the ground.

As near as the investigators could figure it out, Captain Svoboda had done everything that she'd been trained for. She just made one small error. Amy had lost what my military son calls "situational awareness." In the haze of that Arizona afternoon, Amy had become disoriented. Somehow, along the course of her journey, she had become – perhaps degree-by-degree, perhaps in one moment -- inverted. Amy Svoboda failed to see that, for quite some time, she'd been flying UPSIDE DOWN.

Let me be bold to say that I think this might be a problem for a lot of us today. I think you and I are living in an era where increasing numbers of people are something like that pilot. As never before in history, we are moving at mind-numbing speeds. We have at our finger-tips technologies and capacities unprecedented in human civilization. Most of us are traveling at about the same velocity and in the same direction as all of the other people in our flight group. This inspires confidence that our trajectory is certainly the right one. But what if we lack a true North? What if we are no longer looking at the right instrument -- a reliable compass for our lives? What if we and a lot of the people we know are in fact, dangerously disoriented and flying upside-down?

I understand something of that problem. If you had asked me when I was 17 – as some of you are -- how my flight in life was going, I'd have said "Nothing but blue skies." As I've shared before, I grew up in a nine-bedroom home on a ten-acre estate in a beautiful community outside New York City. My dad was a prominent politician and both of my grandfathers were stunning business leaders – one a Wall Street tycoon, the other the Executive VP of an international cruise ship company. Our family photos looked like a Ralph Lauren ad. I was the token ugly guy!

During my senior year in high school, however, the plane of our lives took a turn that was utterly unexpected. My dad lost his congressional race. My parents divorced. Our house burned in a terrible fire. And I came to terms with the fact that one grandfather had spent his life working too late and too long and died within a year of his retirement, while my other grandfather – so apparently successful in all the ways the world measures success – was so unhappy beneath the surface that he went into his bathroom one day with a gun and took his own life.

Almost instantly, it seemed, my life was a mass of smoldering wreckage. At 17, I was bound for blue skies and now at 18, I was exploded on the dirt. I don't know what would have become of me, had Jesus and his people not been walking through that field where my life came crashing down. I don't know what would have become of me, if it weren't for the fact that Jesus knows how to take the broken pieces of someone's life and rebuild it, literally resurrect it, into something new. There in the summer of my 18th year, I asked Christ to come into my life.

The more and more I learned of this Jesus, the more I realized that he wasn't calling for some SLIGHT adjustment in the speed, or attitude, or cabin pressure of my life. A lot of us do that. We figure that God probably wants to make small, comfortable, fine-tuning changes to our lives when the reality is that Jesus wants to completely invert our orientation.

I had believed that if you want to get ahead in life, you need to be willing to elbow and climb over other people, but Jesus said: "the **first will be last and the last will be first**" (Matt 20:16).

I had grown up amidst a culture bent upon preserving your body and self-image at all costs, but this Jesus was saying that **"Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it"** (Luke 9:24).

I had been surrounded by those who teach that happy are those who are insulated from pain, who are secure from poverty, who are strong, who are popular. But Jesus turned the model of success on its head. He was saying: **"No, blessed are those who mourn... who are poor in spirit... who are meek... who are persecuted"** (Matt 5). It is there they find grace.

All my growing up years, I'd absorbed this idea that the aim of life is to fly after power and the powerful – to try and become like the celebrities and idols out there. But Jesus said, **"whoever would be greatest must become the servant of all."**

At the end of my senior year in high school, many years ago, Christ took hold of the steering yoke of my life and began to turn it, one degree at a time. Almost five decades later, I'm still not completely right side up. But I know that HE is. And I'm trying to let Him reorient me.

What has been your experience? Who's flying the plane of your life? Where's it going? Is there some area of your family life, or your spending patterns, or your workplace, or love life where you've gotten upside down and Christ is calling you to realignment? Are you still as open to Christ's guidance as you were when you first took off on the journey of faith? Do you understand that there is a Kingdom by whose map the true North, the true orientation of all things, can be and will one day be definitively seen?

The world today is abuzz with talk of Human Empires. The conversation is all about who will win the next election... who we should be putting our trust in... who can save democracy and prosperity and you and me. But I want to tell you the truth: Only the King can do that. Only the coming of God's Kingdom will bring to pass what everyone in this world is longing for.

In that Kingdom, it is the humble who shall be lifted up. It is the tiny seed that will become the greatest tree of all. It is the set of precious values which the world pushes to the bottom that God will put on top. In the Kingdom of God, it is the way of the cross that leads to a crown.

Dallas Willard, the famous Christian philosopher from USC and my beloved professor at Fuller Seminary, once said this: To become a disciple of Jesus is to accept NOW that inversion of human distinctions that will sooner or later be [brought] upon everyone by the irresistible reality of his kingdom."

This is the worldview with which followers of Jesus are called to move through life. We are not only to trumpet it and circulate it, but personally commit to living it, even when -- to the eyes of the world -- we will appear to be the ones who are flying upside down. If you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God FIRST, you will approach conflict and your enemies differently... you will handle failure and loss differently... you will manage power and resources differently... you will look at death differently. From the world's viewpoint, you will appear to be living upside down.

A man once went into a shop and asked for a compass. The shopkeeper said: "Which kind of compass do you want?" "I don't know," replied the confused shopper. "Is there more than one kind?" "Well," said the owner of the store, "Do

you want the kind of compass with a sharp metal point that you set down in the middle and then go around in a circle, or do you want the kind with the floating arrow that points the way?"

It's still so tempting to prefer the first kind of compass in our time. There are all kinds of people who will say to you: "You need to make yourself – your own feelings and sense of bearing -- the fixed center of your perspective. You need to make human knowledge or current fashion the fixed point you build your life around." If you do that, you'll have plenty of company. But let me bluntly say: If you do that, you'll also waste a lot of time going in circles and, sooner or later, crash unnecessarily.

God has given you and me a different sort of compass to keep us oriented wisely. Its arrow is the Word of God; its magnetic power is the Spirit of God; and its aim is to point the way to life in his Kingdom. Don't lose sight of it. Don't lose hope when others seem to be living their lives at a different angle. Don't despair when the popular landscape changes or the clouds collect around you. Keep setting your sights and your standards by the Kingdom of God above any Empire.

As we come to the Table today, let's check our bearings. Like those all-too-rare, truly committed followers of Christ all around our troubled world today... **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and [safely landed] at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2).**

Would you please pray with me?

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Washington Post, September 13, 1997.

