

“I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me and you will bear much fruit.” John 15:5

Vine & Branches

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The View From Below

Weekly Edition
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This week Daniel Ortega was reinstated for a fourth term as the president of Nicaragua.

That piece of news caught my eye because over 40 years ago, I had lunch with him and the rest of what would become the revolutionary government of Nicaragua.

A small country in Central America that the Sandinistas were finally able to wrestle away from the repressive Somoza dictatorship. And today, all these years later, Daniel Ortega is simply another Somoza. Jailing his opposition. Closing down the free press.

Viciously attacking everyone who had hopes for a free Nicaragua. “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.” So said Lord Acton in 1887.

But you don't need to be in charge of a country to get a head full of power. You can be in charge of a family. Or a small business. Even a church!

There's something about our human nature that simply adores power. That enticing “view from above.” And some folks spend a lifetime chasing it. And many will sell their very souls to get it. Just take a gander at present day Washington D.C.!

But Jesus insists that the way to true power and glory and authority isn't launched from above. It comes from below.

That service, humility and putting ourselves in the other gal's shoes is what actually leads to true wonders and joy.

And so it is this morning, as we eavesdrop on Jesus at the wedding. His first miracle, at Cana. And who's let in on the mystery?

Not the big shots, but the servants! “Now when the steward tasted the water that had become wine, he didn't know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew)...”

They knew because, as servants, they had that view — from below. The place where Jesus hangs out. The place we're invited to be, if we're to be his followers, and not simply his admirers. Who and what do we need to become to get a glimpse of this marvelous view — from below?

That question is particularly pointed when it's aimed at people like me. As someone in charge of something. Because people in charge, (yes, even me!), can get downright bossy. Without even realizing it!

It's so easy to use a job or a title as a handy dandy shortcut to ensuring everyone's marching to the tune I'm piping.

And today, Jesus reminds us that the only tune worth marching to is God's tune. And that tune can be heard by everyone who's willing to become a servant of the one true God.

If only we'll walk away from the many gods we ourselves create. The gods of fortune and fame and security. And while there's no fee to pay, the cost can be steep. By becoming a servant of God, you may be laughed at, ridiculed, and even hated by the status-quo.



The “status-quo” being what the apostles call “the world.” It’s ruled by ego and power.

Its slogans are “might makes right” and “love it or leave it.” Uttered by those who remain blind to or who sneer at — the view from below.

So what’s it mean to become a servant of God? Perhaps it means to become part of “a movement of change within the world. A movement which seeks to transform the way we relate to one another. As individuals, yes.

But more importantly, through the structures we create that dehumanize. This movement is always despised by the world. Because it challenges and confronts the death spiral that “the world’s” values lead to.

And yet it’s a movement that, in God’s good time, is certain to ‘overcome the world.’ Make no mistake, preaching this gospel is a direct assault on all that “the world” holds dear. It’s a direct threat to the economic and political powers that create those values.” H. McCabe, *Commonweal*, 18, paraphrased.

And so, from the servant’s point of view, this view from below, we aim to change the direction the world is heading in. Rather than aiming at amassing wealth, we are called to aim first at providing all people with a decent life.

Instead of basking in the illusion that western man is the epitome of creation, we begin to learn and adopt the wisdom of indigenous people.

It means that we love people and use things — rather than using people and loving things. It means that the path forward is not so much about a revolution as it is about a complete transformation.

From self-interest to service. From grabbing to giving. “Oh really?” you may be asking yourself. Aren’t Christians in fact focused, just like everyone else, on feathering their own nests? All while doing just enough to sneak into the pearly gates on the other side of this life? Sadly, the answer is too often: Yes, indeed! But that’s not the last word.

We are all invited into the life that Jesus calls “the kingdom of God.” A kingdom the world successfully, and quite wrongly, redefines as “heaven.” A definition that Jesus rejects. The fact is, God’s primary concern isn’t with disembodied souls nor with life after death.

God’s primary concern is with this life. Isn’t that precisely why God becomes a human being? To show us how to become fully human? Not in the sweet bye and bye! But today! In this life!

As the brilliant theologian (and retired bishop) N.T. Wright insists: “Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny. It’s the other, hidden dimension, of ordinary life. God’s dimension!” Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 19.

I know, it’s hard to wrap our heads around this. That’s why Jesus tells stories. Stories that help us find our way into this view — from below.

That place where we’re given a glimpse of what this kingdom - hidden within our everyday life - is like. It’s like a treasure buried in a field.

And when you find it, you sell everything as you race to buy it. It’s like a handful of yeast thrown into a big sack of flour, creating

bread for the whole neighborhood. It’s like wheat growing among weeds.

Or a pearl growing inside a grave-like shell. It’s like a woman finding her lost coin.

Or a man welcoming home his long lost son. This kingdom is open to everyone!

If only we will move ourselves from the lofty heights of pride and me first — to the radical edge where the servant sits. And waits.

And is amazed.

Which is why the rich and the powerful usually don’t get it. But children almost always do. It’s why stories, not slogans, experience, not creeds, show us the way into this odd new life.

Seeing life through servant eyes, that view from below, is something that the great Karl Barth experienced.

Perhaps the greatest theologian of the 20th century, the author of huge volumes detailing every line of scripture, he’s asked after a lecture one day to summarize his faith.

He replies: “This is my faith: Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

When we refuse to take on servant’s eyes, we become trapped in the illusion that we can control people, places and things.

We become like Herod when he’s told Jesus is raising the dead. “I allow no man to raise the dead!

This man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise the dead! Where is this man?’ The servant replies, “He is everywhere my Lord. But it is hard to find him.” O. Wilde, *Salome*, modified.

Hard, that is, until you have acquired servant eyes. Eyes accustomed to that glorious view — from below. Because with these eyes, you’ll find him everywhere.

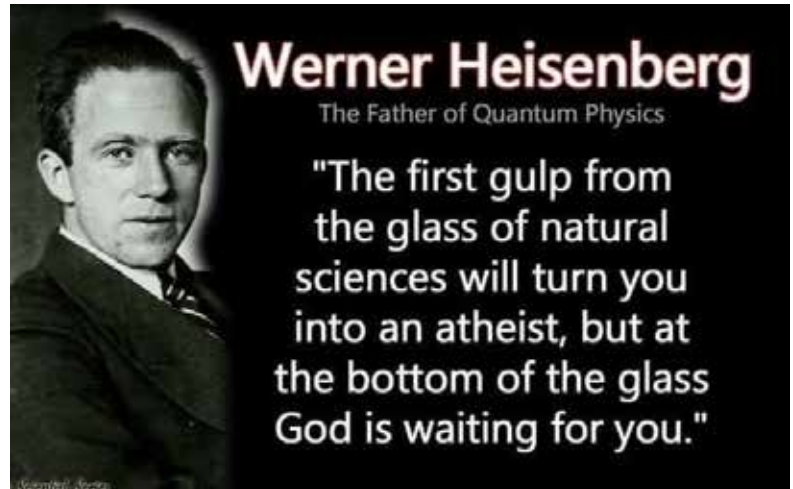
As Jesus assures us in the Gospel of Thomas: “Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up a rock, you’ll find me there.”

These are the marvels that await those willing to embrace, and endure, the view — from below.

+amen

Quoteable Quotes from Notable Folks

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS NOT TO BE HAPPY. IT IS TO BE USEFUL, TO BE HONORABLE, TO BE COMPASSIONATE, TO HAVE IT MAKE SOME DIFFERENCE THAT YOU HAVE LIVED AND LIVED WELL.



We are bodies of broken bones. I guess I'd always known but never fully considered that being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.

We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means embracing our broken natures and the compassion that remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness, forswear compassion, and, as a result, deny our own humanity."

-Thomas Merton

The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.

- Thomas Merton

The Reverend Deacon Viliami Langi



Our dear friend, the Reverend Villiami Langi, has moved on to the next life. A tireless worker in the fields of the Lord for his whole life, he became the first Episcopal deacon of Tongan descent in the United States. We shall miss his wonderful sense of humor, his devotion to Saint Elizabeth's, and his passionate belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

