

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Proper 12 (A) - 26 July 2026
Romans 8:26-39
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Turn it Around!

Timothy Shriver has dedicated his life to advocating for individuals living with intellectual disabilities. Born into great privilege as a member of the Kennedy family, Shriver has chosen a life of service to those who aren't usually considered "successful" according to our society's measures of academic, professional, or physical achievement. Like his mother Eunice before him, Shriver is probably best known for his work with the Special Olympics, which he has chaired for the past 30 years.

If you ever have a chance to attend a Special Olympics competition, I encourage you to grab it. I went once, years ago, and my heart grew three sizes that day.¹ I have never forgotten it.

In his book, [*Fully Alive: Discovering What Matters Most*](#) (which I also recommend), Tim Shriver tells the story of the 1995 World Special Olympics Games, held that year in Connecticut. The Opening Ceremony was taking place at the Yale Bowl in New Haven, and then-President Bill and First Lady Hillary Clinton were scheduled to attend, along with other celebrities and dignitaries. The stadium was *packed*, and it was buzzing with energy and, to use Shriver's word, "chaos."²

The Secret Service was, as one might expect, on high alert. Instead of addressing the crowd from the field, President Clinton was going to have to speak from the very top of the stadium, where they could protect him better. Athletes and audience members would have to watch on a jumbotron, instead of up close.

¹ *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, 1966.

² Timothy Shriver, *Fully Alive: Discovering What Matters Most* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014), 3.

Now, in order to document this extraordinary event, each of the thousands of athletes was given a disposable camera on the way into the Bowl. (This was way before the days of smart phones, after all.) As you might imagine, this was a big deal.

As Shriver tells the story, a professional photographer down on the field spotted a group of athletes looking through their cameras up to the box where the President was due to start speaking. No doubt he felt sorry for them, because there was no way they would be able to get a decent photo from that distance, without a zoom lens.

But that wasn't the only problem: The photographer noticed that they were holding the cameras *backwards*. So, trying to help, he approached the athletes and showed them the right way to hold a camera to take a picture.

And one of the group responded,

*Oh...thank you, sir. But may I show you something? If you turn the camera around and hold your eye up to the viewfinder and look backward, it still works. It works like a telescope and you can see the president very clearly. So we're using these little cameras so we can get a good view of the president. But thank you for helping us.*³

Just who was helping whom...?

The lesson is clear, I think:

Sometimes we just need to turn things around to see a different way.

This is precisely what Jesus does in this morning's Gospel: He gives us a glimpse of the world as we know it seen from another perspective. Jesus offers a God's-eye view of what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like.

³ Shriver, 5.

The Kingdom is like...

- a mustard seed...
- or like a treasure hidden in a field...
- or like a merchant in search of fine pearls...
- or like a net that was thrown into the sea...

Or my personal favorite:

- The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

Like the sower in the Gospels the past couple of weeks, Jesus casts these “parable seeds” broadly, hoping that at least one of them will “land” with his audience and take root in their hearts. Each is a way of understanding that God’s Kingdom is quite unlike the earthly realm under which the people are living.

Now, I need to pause to say something about the concept of, “kingdom,” which many of us may find troubling – especially in this era of “No Kings.” Sometimes the term “Reign of God” or “Heaven” is used instead. But that subtle semantic change kind of misses the point.

Because Jesus lived and taught and preached at a particular moment in history, in a particular place that was ruled by a foreign power. Judea at the time of Jesus was subject not only to the rule of the Emperor, Caesar, but also to the reign of the local Kings, the Herods – first Herod the Great, who was on the throne when Jesus was born, and later his son Herod Antipas. Neither Herod enjoyed a particularly positive reputation among the Jewish people of the first century, and for good reason. Jesus doesn’t call Herod “that fox” for nothing!

Over-against that specific context of oppressive authority, the Kingdom of Heaven stands out. Jesus paints a vivid picture of what that Kingdom looks like, in contrast to the “powers and principalities” of this world. It is a Kingdom based on love, where everyone belongs, regardless of class, or race, or economic status, or marital status, or illness, or intellectual capacity. It is a Kingdom

founded on forgiveness, where we are told to go to extraordinary means to bring wayward members back into community. It is a Kingdom with open borders, that always invites more people in. Where people care for each other. Where greatness is defined by service. Where hope and joy abound, even in the midst of pain.

It is a Kingdom in which we are invited to turn the camera around, so to speak, and see things differently.

But how do we do this? How do we take this ancient, maybe even anachronistic, idea of the Kingdom of God and translate it into a way of living our faith in our context now?

I feel as though I am on pretty solid ground in saying that many, if not most, of us here this morning are troubled by the state of things in our country today. This isn't meant as a partisan accusation, but rather as commentary on the degree of cruelty and absence of compassion we are seeing in many quarters.

I could cite any number of examples, but one that I believe has upset a broad swath of Americans is our recent treatment of Canada in the wake of devastating wildfires – fires that have disproportionately impacted and displaced First Nations peoples in Ontario. Rather than offering help to our fellow humans, we are sanctioning a hurting country because *we* were affected.

Who do we think we are? Is that who we *want* to be?

We each can cite instances of indifference and harm that especially hurt our hearts.

So what do we do about it?

I think we begin by turning the camera around, looking through the view finder, and recognizing that we're not crazy to be upset.

God's vision is very different – in some cases 180-degrees removed – from what we are seeing with greater and greater frequency on the news.

And if our faith means *anything* to us, then we are obligated to respond. There are many ways to do this.

For one, we can speak up. To name that, as Christians, we are called to love our neighbors *and* our enemies, to serve others, and to dethrone ourselves from the center of the universe. That is fundamental to what we say we believe as followers of Jesus.

I realize that such a witness may not be comfortable, or even safe, for all of us. Depending on our personal or professional situation, that kind of vocal pushback may not be particularly wise. Not much has changed in 2000 years.

But there are other ways of advocating for, of advancing, God's Kingdom. Remember the sower? There are lots of seeds in that pouch, and Jesus keeps on casting them hither and yon. Find the one that resonates with you.

I said earlier that my favorite among Jesus' descriptions of the Kingdom of Heaven is the image of yeast. If you have ever seen baker's yeast, you know that its individual grains are tiny – almost imperceptible to the eye. But when mixed with the right mediums (warm water and sugar), those grains produce carbon dioxide that makes the other ingredients expand. *Et voilà!* Soon you have bread.

It just takes a little bit to make an impact. As St. Paul writes, "Do you not know that a little leaven works through the whole batch of dough?" (1 Cor. 5:6). Our smallest actions – either negative or, God-willing, positive – can have a tremendous influence.

Let's choose the positive, shall we?

I'd like to invite you to help me with something today:

Over on those tables at the back of the Hall you will find sheets of paper that say, *The Kingdom of Heaven is like...*

There are pens there, too.

After worship, before you head out to grab your coffee and snacks, please stop by those tables and jot down a couple of examples – more, if you’ve got them.

What does the Kingdom of Heaven in action, in our time and place, look like to you?

Maybe it’s Blessing Bags, for example, or bottles of cooking oil. You find your own images. You don’t need to put your name on the papers: I just want to collate them to share with the congregation...and, hopefully, to inspire one another.

Beloveds, how about if we turn the camera around to see God more clearly?

Amen.