

Love in a less-than-wonderful world

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“I see trees of green, red roses, too.
I see them bloom for me and you,
And I think to myself,
‘What a wonderful world.’”

Louis Armstrong’s song, “What a Wonderful World,” is one of my favorites. The words and tune echo in my mind and escape my lips often. And yet

Some accused Armstrong of being an Uncle Tom or even something of a Pollyanna, lighting up the stage with his trademark smile and laugh, catering to wealthy white audiences during decades of Jim Crow. The cheerful sentiment of “What a Wonderful World” seems to confirm his blindness to the world as it is, but only to those who don’t know his full catalog.

I was introduced to Armstrong’s music in high school by my Sunday school teacher, who was trying to give me an alternative to the rap music he wished I would leave behind. He didn’t object to rap music *per se* but to the particular messages of anger and violence I was absorbing. He thought Louis Armstrong was a more positive influence. Indeed, “Mack the Knife” is a much more toe-tapping take on violence than most gangster rap.

From the beginning, Armstrong was a jarring substitute. Then, I heard something different—“Black and Blue.” It sounded like the beginning of a New Orleans jazz funeral.

“I’m so forlorn. Life’s just a thorn.
My heart is torn. Why was I born?”

What did I do to be so black and blue?
I'm hurt inside, but that don't help my case
Cause I can't hide what is on my face."

This, yes, this one is the truth. You can hear it in the hush of the band and the audience.

How can this come from the same person who gave us "What a Wonderful World?" How can a person so well-acquainted with the ugliness of the world sing of its wonder and beauty?

Ah, but isn't that the gospel?

Here's a truth: This is a less-than-wonderful world.

Every time "What a Wonderful World" comes to mind or escapes my lips, it is infused with bittersweet irony. It is infused with the reality and horror of a world in which people hate and brutalize other people. It is infused with the words and actions of white supremacists and nationalists who terrorize African-Americans, Jews and other minorities. It is infused with the dangers women and children face because they are women and children. It is infused with systemic and endemic poverty oppressing millions of people. It is infused with religious persecution and war that threaten us all. To say nothing of natural threats.

How—in this world—can anyone smile and sing, "What a wonderful world?"

If there is any truth to the gospel, and there is more than enough truth to the gospel, we can.

For starters, the one who gives us the gospel did not recuse himself from any of this world's suffering and brutality. He entered it fully in order to redeem it. His succumbing to and enduring of death and his rising to life again performed and accomplished the one thing that can turn "black and

blue” into “a wonderful world” again.

Yes, again. The world was wonderful to begin with; it was we who turned it black and blue. Now, in a way I don’t understand, Christ has redeemed the world, reconciling it to God and initiating restoration—though restoration is only underway and not yet fully realized.

So, there is the completed work of Christ, the empty tomb that enables us to look toward a wonderful world again, the new creation that is at once here and not yet here.

Then there is the ongoing work of Christ carried out in and through us in real time in this less-than-wonderful world. And because the work of Christ is ongoing in and through us, not only can we lean into the idea of a wonderful world, we must—but not with our heads in the sand.

We must acknowledge and face head on human brutality, such as what a white supremacist did to 11 Jews and their entire community, what a white supremacist did to two African-Americans in a grocery store, and what another individual did through the mail to high profile people and organizations. We must call these things what they are—evil—and the people who perpetrate them what they are—in need of redemption.

We must be ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21) because if we follow Jesus we no longer live for ourselves but live for him, the Reconciler, who took in himself the thorns of this world in order to transform them into the crown of life.

Perhaps all of this sounds too pie-in-the-sky. Perhaps being like Jesus in this hostile world seems completely tone deaf. Perhaps it sounds too much like “What a Wonderful World” must have sounded like in 1967 when more than 100 race riots erupted in the United States and in 1968 during even more riots and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Perhaps I really am out of my mind (2 Corinthians 5:13).

But as King put it: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

May Christ’s love compel us to sing darkness and hate out of this hurting world.

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