

EFREM SMITH



killing
us softly

reborn in the

upside-down

image of God

You can't get too much Efrem Smith. He has the voice of a prophet and the heart of a pastor. This book is nothing short of an invitation to follow the revolutionary Jesus. It's a call to live in ways that don't compute, to fight with weapons that do not kill, and to love in a way that confounds the world.

SHANE CLAIBORNE

Author and activist

Efrem Smith has got it right. This *is* an upside-down world—for Christians as well. We cling to differences that divide us instead of to Christ, who unites us; we're known in the public sphere for what we're against rather than what we're for; and we're more likely to pursue the American dream than join Jesus' revolution of radical love. God can't use us in this condition. *Killing Us Softly* is an eloquent reflection on what it means to die to self in order to live right side up as Christ's ambassadors in a broken world.

RICHARD STEARNS

President of World Vision US and author of *The Hole in Our Gospel*

We need to stop peddling a convenient and palatable version of Christianity. To invite people to Christ without discipleship is an oxymoron. This is precisely why *Killing Us Softly* is so important and timely. This is a powerful, biblical, bold, prophetic, and yet pastoral reminder of the call of discipleship.

REV. EUGENE CHO

Pastor, humanitarian, and author of *Overrated*

In a Western Christian world that is often enamored of outward appearance, upward mobility, and the acquisition of power, Efrem Smith is here to proclaim that there is another way—one that leads to true freedom and a commitment to justice. I love this book because Efrem recognizes that in order to do good work in this broken world, we must first examine our hearts, experiences, and identities. To this end, Efrem offers a concise spirituality and set of practices that form us to transform this world. Efrem is one of the most innovative evangelicals leading at the intersection of justice and spirituality. I do not take his words lightly.

CHRISTENA CLEVELAND, PHD

Associate professor of the practice of reconciliation, Duke Divinity School, and author of *Disunity in Christ*

Killing Us Softly provides a compelling vision of transformation for our fallen world. The reminder that through Christ all things are being turned right side up and conformed to his splendor is especially hopeful for those of us who are called to live and minister in vulnerable communities. Biblical. Challenging. Hopeful.

NOEL CASTELLANOS

President of Christian Community Development Association and author of *Where the Cross Meets the Street*



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us softly

Reborn in the Upside-Down Image of God

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NAVPRESS 

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Introduction

I'M SITTING IN THE SANCTUARY of a black church in the small town of Bosco, Louisiana, near the city of Monroe in the northern part of the state. This is where my father, Forice Smith, was born and raised. I'm in my early teens. I'm sitting with my father, my mother Sandra, and my younger brother Tramaine in this small church called Cuba Missionary Baptist. Singing, shouting, prayers, and amens fill the air. With smiles and laughs the people agree with the testimonies that are given. The pastor preaches a sermon that includes a climactic declaration that the grave couldn't hold Jesus and that through his resurrection we can all find a home in glory. Many folks begin clapping.

What a service this was. The fact that I still remember it signifies how meaningful it was to me. But this was not a Sunday morning worship experience. This was actually the funeral service for my grandfather, Fred Smith.

"Grand Daddy Fred" had been a dedicated deacon

in this small country church. His faith in Christ had a tremendous impact on me as a kid. There were a few summers when my parents would pack up the car and we would drive from Minneapolis, Minnesota, all the way into the Deep South. Those hot summers provided opportunities to play with my southern cousins, sit at the feet of elders who had lived through Jim Crow segregation, and eat my grandmother Mary's made-from-scratch biscuits just about every morning for breakfast. I also remember Grand Daddy Fred sitting on the porch early each morning, reading the Bible out loud. My brother Tramaine, cousin Keisha, and I would wake up most mornings to his voice reading the Word of God. Most of the time he was a very quiet man, so many times when I heard his voice, it was Scripture that was being spoken. Because of his witness, I had no trouble believing that when he died he was going to be in heaven.

I was sad when Grand Daddy Fred died. I cried on my mother's shoulder during the funeral. But I also found myself moved by the call of the pastor to celebrate his death, knowing that he was with the One he spoke of so often when he sat on the porch reading the Bible out loud.

I came to understand something unique about black church funerals. Many African American pastors encourage those mourning the loss of their loved one to see this service not as a funeral but as a

"home-going." I have heard this term all my life. I can't remember a time when I have attended a funeral service led by an African American pastor when this term wasn't used.

By speaking in terms of "home-going," the pastor is not trying to take away from the reality of the pain and sorrow that family and friends are feeling from losing someone who meant so much to them. The purpose of positioning this event as a home-going service is to remind those mourning that if the person was Christian, they are now in a better place. It's appropriate to mourn but allow room in your heart to celebrate as well.

I have been to black home-going services where sorrow and mourning share space with "Hallelujah!" and "Praise God!" Songs of lament share space with songs of celebration. Sounds of wailing are mixed with shouts of joy. The pastor encourages the congregation to remember that the deceased is now face to face with their Lord and Savior. They have transitioned to the heavenly realm, where there is no more pain and no more sorrow. Though the death of a beloved child of God brings pain to those of us still in the earthly realm, our loved one has now transitioned into eternity.

This approach to the funeral in the black church finds its beginnings within the context of slavery. The black church began as an invisible, underground church. I often hear evangelicals speak of

underground churches in the Middle East or in parts of Asia or Eastern Europe—places where Christians have to gather in secret because their coming together as a church body is illegal. Well, the black church in the United States began as just such an underground and illegal gathering. Black slaves would retreat late at night into the woods of the Deep South to pray, sing, and hear a more liberating take on the Bible. They would create what would become known as spirituals. Many of these spirituals were contextualized hymns, centered around freedom. Not knowing whether they would ever experience freedom in this world, these people would sing and preach about the freedom they would one day experience in heaven. This makes sense of a chorus such as “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.” There was a belief that God could come and deliver them into heaven, a place of freedom and direct relationship with a liberating God.

It is within the upside-down, oppressive, and unjust system of American slavery that an organic theology of death as transition into freedom is developed. This could also have been something of a coping mechanism for slaves, a way of addressing the fear of death. Death for the black slave could very well have been seen as better than life.

Christian theology in general does point to death not being an end so much as a transition. Death brings forth the opportunity to experience freedom and

direct relationship with God in fullness. Christ tells his followers in the Gospels that he goes to prepare a place for them. The Promised Land into which God led the Hebrews in the Old Testament has been replaced in Christ by an eternal Kingdom. Death is defeated in Christ because death is not the end for the Christian. Death is not to be feared by the Christian.

This book is about death. But it's not about physically dying; it's about *spiritually* dying. Embracing death is a way of understanding a key element of Christian formation. Dying spiritually can be a way to experience our decreasing so that God might increase in our lives. Just as physical death for the Christian is the transition into a deeper and eternal experience of the Kingdom of God—we will see our God face to face—there is a spiritual death that can lead us into greater intimacy with God and a deeper discovery of our life mission *right now*.

When we became Christians, we died to our old selves and became new creations. The Christian life is about the journey of experiencing that death to the old self and becoming a new self. Physical death is our entrance into the Kingdom of God; embracing a life of spiritual dying is our participation in the Kingdom's entering into this sinful and broken world. To serve as ambassadors of reconciliation and advancers of the Kingdom, we must be willing to die.

Death is not a comfortable topic for me. Though

KILLING US SOFTLY

I anticipate being in eternity with my God one day, I also struggle, as I enter my late forties, with thinking about my death. I can only imagine that the moment that I start to enter my death will truly test everything that I believe about being a Christian. Similarly, embracing spiritual death has not been easy for me. But I am experiencing more and more how liberating it is. I am allowing God to do surgery on my soul—to kill me, certainly, but to do so softly, lovingly—so that I might die to the upside-down world we find ourselves in, and be empowered to live as a right-side-up child of God. I am living in the messiness of God removing things in me that are not of him so that my life might reflect him more each day.

This book is an invitation to enter into this journey of being killed softly by God's steadfast love and grace, that we might be living vehicles of God's love, truth, grace, justice, and transformation.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Think about the funerals and home-going celebrations you've experienced in your life. How has death impacted you?

Recall a loved one whose life pointed you to the Kingdom of God. How were you blessed by his or her life?

1

LIVING IN A BIZARRO WORLD

I LOVE SUPERHERO MOVIES. In the past few years I have seen *The Avengers*, *X-Men*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, *Ant-Man*, and *Captain America: Civil War* leap from the pages of comic books to the film screen. I have seen these films multiple times in theaters, on DVD, and on cable television. Not to be outdone by these characters from the Marvel Comics universe, DC Comics superheroes have made it to film as well, with heroes such as Batman and Superman and, I hope, many more in the future. I really love superhero movies.

This love for superheroes goes back to my childhood in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the summer months I would meet my friends on the corner at the end of our block. We would sit on the sidewalk, reading,

comparing, and trading our *Thor*, *Spider-Man*, *Batman*, and *Superman* comics. There was one comic series that was my favorite; I still have some of those comics today. It's a Superman comic series called *Bizarro World*.

Bizarro is an upside-down world—so upside-down that there is a villain on Bizarro World who looks just like Superman. Our world is threatened by Bizarro World, so Superman decides to sacrifice himself, leaving our world to confront Bizarro Superman on his home planet.

To go with this storyline, you have to believe that for the most part, things on planet Earth are good. Where we live there is peace and harmony, families are stable, and communities are flourishing. Our planet is fine; it's Bizarro World that is backward and broken.

But the truth is, we live in Bizarro World. Sure, we can point to examples of good communities, stable families, and peace and harmony here and there. But if we're honest, there are far too many signs that our reality is Bizarro.

Violence as the primary means of solving conflict.

Continued racial strife and tensions.

Broken families and fatherless homes.

Human beings sold into slavery.

Poverty and disease plaguing whole nations.

Yes, if we're honest, we live in an upside-down world. From individual people to institutions and

societal systems, there is brokenness and backwardness all around us. And like the Bizarro World of the comics, the upside-down world we inhabit seems, to the untrained eye, to be right side up.

As Christians, we follow a God who promises a very different kind of world. What is our responsibility to our broken and upside-down world? How do we discover our purpose in it?

It's one thing to admit the reality of the upside-down world; it's another to know how Christ wants us to engage it. It begins with a deeper understanding of the ultimate heroic one, Jesus Christ.

When Christ, the Son of God, left the heavenly realms to confront our upside-down world, he came in human form. The Scriptures tell us why he came and what he came to do: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Christ gave us a picture of what this world could look like if it was set right side up again. When Christ gave mobility to the paralyzed, when a diseased woman touched his clothes and was healed, when he raised a girl from the dead, and when he ate with sinners, he was demonstrating the Kingdom of God—the world set right.

In his teaching, Christ declared that the Kingdom of God was at hand. You would think the prospect of such a world would be received with joy, but his

declarations and demonstrations led him to the cross. Christ died for this Bizarro world. And in so doing, he demonstrated finally and emphatically that Bizarro lives matter to God.

Because Christ died for us and, in a particularly Bizarro moment, rose again from the grave and conquered death for us, we who embrace him as Lord and Savior can experience our lives being turned right side up. And one day he will return to our world and finally, emphatically turn it right side up. On that day we will experience a new heaven and a new earth—a world with no tears, no pain, no brokenness, no backwardness—no death.

Until then, we continue to live in an upside-down reality. We have to figure out how to do that well, and what our role is as right-side-up people in an upside-down world.

We who have joined with the Kingdom of God live in an uncomfortable place. Freed by Christ's sacrifice, we nevertheless continue to occupy systems, institutions, and even beliefs calibrated to an upside-down world. Our friends and neighbors have grown accustomed to living upside-down. The world is killing them, but it's doing so in a way that feels simply like normal life.

The church seems to be divided when it comes to understanding what it means to live in this sinful and broken world. Some Christians see the challenge as

individual sinners in need of being saved from their individual sins. Others see the challenge as sinful systems of injustice and oppression. Still others see the challenge as entirely supernatural: Our battle is focused entirely on Satan, God's archenemy.

They're all right—to a point. Our problem is that our world is upside-down: Individuals are plagued with sin, systems and structures are steeped in sin, and Satan is engaged in a protracted battle to keep the world broken by sin. We need this holistic understanding of our challenge so that we can have a more biblical approach to engaging it for transformation.

BROKEN LIVES

Whether we realize it or not, our broken lives are killing us from the inside. We may not feel as if we are dying on the inside, but we are. We are being separated from the wonderful and eternal person that God has created us each to be. Sin is a silent killer seeking to strip us of our true identity and purpose. Sin can lead someone to live in a continual state of anger, hatred, pride, arrogance, low self-esteem, abandonment, prejudice, unforgiveness, or selfishness.

Sin and the broken life it engenders in us convince us on the inside that we are less than average, that we will never amount to anything. Sin can be a death sentence on a person's life. Sin can also lead to a person

thinking more of themselves than they should, producing a sort of self-worship. Whether by thinking that we are less than God created us to be or by living as gods unto ourselves, living in sin and being impacted by sinful forces and structures is a slow death leading to eternal death. Sin causes us to live life on a death march.

But sin does more than just kill *us*. It also seeks to kill others *through* us. Sinful and broken people who are slowly dying on the inside can pass their spiritually toxic death sentence on to others. Sinful people collectively build broken families, governments, systems, institutions, and communities. This causes sin to go from killing a person to killing whole people groups, entire communities, and potentially a nation. This is what oppression ultimately looks like.

This killing process can look like a father who abandons his wife and child. How did he arrive at such a decision? Is he simply a sinful individual, a bad father and husband? Or is there more going on?

Considered holistically, the answer is not simple. We're dealing with someone who is dying on the inside. His own sinful behavior, combined with the sinful and broken systems surrounding the community where he lives—oppression from within and from without—leads him to an act of betrayal. Though he has applied for jobs he is more than qualified for, he is denied in every instance. Businesses have abandoned

his neighborhood where just a few years earlier there were plenty of jobs. He feels like less than a man now. Though you can't totally blame his choice on systems, the oppressive systems around him have made it difficult for him to see himself as someone made in the image of God. Some days when he should be working, he finds himself just walking down the street. Some of the retired people in the community and even some of the police officers look at him as if he is a threat to the community, but he's just wandering the streets instead of working a full-time job somewhere. He is softly dying and doesn't even know how to communicate the state of his soul. Gradually his despair turns to anger. He begins to treat his wife differently. There are regular arguments that fill the home on a nightly basis. And eventually he leaves.

So, slowly dying, he makes a choice that extends his dying to others. His choice to leave creates bitterness toward men within his wife, who is now raising a child on her own. She carries anger in her heart, believing that she will never be able to trust another man again. Her pride might not show it, but sin through a broken relationship is killing her on the inside. Meanwhile, her son is now growing up without a father. This broken relationship leads to a boy growing into manhood while struggling with abandonment. Sin showing up in people, systems, and relationships is deadly indeed.

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I have been a pastor, mostly in the urban context, for a little over twenty-five years. I have encountered many people who are dying on the inside as they attempt to navigate their sinful lives and this upside-down, sinful world. I have sat with some who in tears come to a place of recognizing their broken lives. What is more challenging are those who don't realize that sin is slowly killing them. This makes sinful choices and systems seem like right choices and just systems. They are so conditioned by this Bizarro world we live in that they have accepted the upside-down world as just right for them. The upside-down, sinful world is experienced by them as right side up.

Sin is both an individual and a systemic reality. There are some people who have no problem seeing how sin shows up in an individual, begins to kill that person, and affects their relationships, passing on spiritual death. They have a harder time believing that sinful systems, institutions, and structures also can play an oppressive role. But it is sinful and broken people who build our systems and institutions. Sin is just that deadly.

Sin impacts the very core of our being. We are born with broken hearts and broken minds. Sin causes us to deceive ourselves, to think that we can achieve a good life under this death sentence.

We were originally created to bear God's image, to work in relationship with our Creator, to steward

God's creation and fill the world with the glory of God (Genesis 1:26-28). God created us right side up. Sin altered this. Sin causes us to fear, to doubt, and to mistrust God's truth. We are led to question God's intentions for us, isolating ourselves from God and the intimate relationship that would be available to us.

Our broken and sinful lives are directly tied to this broken relationship with God. The disruption of the relationship between God and those made in God's own image turned all of creation upside down. God, of course, remains right side up. So God seems strange to us, and the things of this broken world seem safer. Upside-down people are tempted to worship the upside-down creations of God rather than the right-side-up God.

God, of course, cannot affirm an upside-down world or the upside-down logic that goes with it. Neither can he excuse the people who bear his image for their rejection of him.

What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks

to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Romans 1:19-25

The upside-down life is an idolatrous life—our hearts and worship turned away from God toward other things. This leads to dishonorable passions (the upside-down heart) and debased thinking (the upside-down mind). When a person is inordinately passionate about material things—such as houses, cars, and money, or even other people—they are exchanging the glory of the immortal God for other things. This is worldly passion, evidence of an upside-down heart. Debased thinking privileges the philosophies and ideologies of this world over and against the wisdom, revelation, and knowledge of God. When we put worldly logic over *logos* (the Word of God, God as the living Word), we elevate the ways of an upside-down

world over God. What can seem like signs of success, power, contentment, and happiness in the upside-down world can actually be the very things holding us captive, killing us. It's not that success, influence, and power are in and of themselves bad things. It's how those things, in the context of a Bizarro world, can take hold of us.

I was able to see an example of this when I planted a church in inner-city Minneapolis in 2003. Though the Sanctuary Covenant was planted in a predominantly African American and urban community, the church grew pretty quickly not only in number but also in diversity. The diversity extended well beyond race: There were social workers worshipping in the same space as professional athletes, corporate executives, politicians, and homeless people. I have to admit that I was both surprised and excited when I began to see the number of corporate executives joining the church. As a young urban pastor, I desired to see the church become a self-sustaining, transformative force of evangelism, discipleship, and community development in our under-resourced urban setting. Seeing families who were college-educated and professional join the church built a type of security in me that we could become the type of church I envisioned. I hate to admit it, but I stereotyped people by class early on in my church-planting experience: I saw the poor as the people we would reach, equip, and empower, and

the well-resourced as those who would assist me in that endeavor.

I remember the afternoon I went to visit an executive vice president of a Fortune 500 company who had recently decided to join the church with his family. I went to meet him with the intention of sharing the vision I had for church growth, deeper commitment to community development, and a potential site for a church building. I was hoping he would be inspired by all of this and give financially to it. As I sat in his office and began to share passionately about where our church could go, I noticed that he had a strange look on his face. Was I doing a bad job of communicating? Did I need to go to a seminar on how to present vision to corporate executives?

He looked at me and said that he was hoping that I had come to meet with *him*—not to talk about the church but to talk about *him*. He began to share with me about the pressures of his responsibilities, the various temptations and attacks that come your way in a position like his. He shared about the struggles of trying to balance the high demands of his job with being a husband and father. He shared in a very transparent way about how guys like him were dying inside. “I was looking forward to meeting with you because I really need a pastor, and I need the community of other Christian men. You shouldn’t assume guys like me are doing fine because of our titles, wealth, and influence.”

I felt ashamed in my soul. I had gone through my life up until that point assuming that people like him had great lives. Sure, I believed that they needed a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and that they needed to live the life of a disciple-maker, but I had been conditioned to believe, based on their success in this world, that their lives were already right side up.

This man's transparency totally dismantled my thinking. I had to come to terms with a faulty belief system that I had been carrying around. Because I grew up in a blue-collar urban family setting, I had grown to believe that the right-side-up life was built on achievement and success. As a kid, I dreamed of going to college, getting a great-paying job, owning a nice house, and driving a luxury car. Because I sensed a call to ministry my senior year in college, I walked away from this dream in my early twenties. Following "the call of God" into ministry was honorable, I believed, but it included sacrificing the dream of success I had.

I still, however, continued to believe on some level that the ultimate sign of living right side up was "the successful life" according to the American Dream. Moving up, the pursuit of prosperity in and of itself, was the right-side-up life I had adopted in my thinking and sacrificed for my call. I looked up to "successful" people.

Moreover, because I began my ministry career in the

urban parachurch context (such as Hospitality House and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes), I relied on financial donors to raise my salary. During the twelve years I spent as an urban parachurch youth pastor, I spent a lot of time going to successful marketplace Christians to raise money. I carried this mind-set into how I approached successful people as a church planter and pastor. My focus was on their success and ability to financially support my ministry. They themselves weren't my focus. I never thought that they might be dying inside.

I'm grateful for the meeting I had in the office of this successful executive who was willing to bare his soul. Through him I connected with other business executives within the church who were themselves struggling with the challenges of our upside-down world. We started a group that met monthly for breakfast, prayer, Bible study, and fellowship. Our families began to connect on a regular basis.

In our monthly meetings, a different type of dying on the inside began taking place. God was doing something on the inside of us, so that we would be empowered through the Holy Spirit to live right-side up at home and at work. Around the table at our local diner, we explored the contrast between dying in the soul from the pressures of the world, and dying to self in order to discover more deeply what it means to be the beloved child of God.

In order to do this, we had to be willing to wrestle with how deadly sin could be—even after making the commitment to follow Christ. Sin is self-perpetuating, slowly and silently killing every person who refuses to acknowledge his or her sins and repent. Even those who are experiencing some level of joy, happiness, and peace in their upside-down lives are slowly dying. Living with sin in this way is a slow death—so slow that we think it’s normal life.

But individual sin and struggle is not the only sign that we live in a broken and upside-down world. Our sin works its way out of us to do its deadly work on our relationships. We also must acknowledge the upside-down impact of our broken world on our relationships.

BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Soon after sin entered into our world through the first man and woman, brokenness disrupted the relationship between two of their sons, Cain and Abel.

In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain,

“Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

Genesis 4:3-8

Could it be that sin caused Cain to believe his identity was strictly in the fruit of his labor? Once we've abandoned our identity in God, upside-down people begin to look for our identity in what we produce. God himself anticipated this in his judgment of Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (Genesis 3:17). The outcome of sin was that Adam was being ruled by the very things he was supposed to have dominion over. The world had been turned upside down. His son Cain adapted accordingly, basing his identity on the very things he was supposed to have dominion over.

This broken pursuit of acceptance breeds insecurity. We compete with the people around us for acceptance. For Cain, that competition led to him killing his own brother. But even before we read about the broken relationship between Cain and Abel, we see

brokenness between Adam and Eve and between Eve and her children at the moment of childbirth.

To the woman he said,

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.

Genesis 3:16

The simple act of bringing life into this world—which God had instructed Adam and Eve to do—put pain between the mother and her child. One could argue that the devaluing of life in the womb is a direct result of the broken and upside-down relationships that came from the Fall.

There are so many tragic and sinful examples of broken relationships. Within the family structure we see fatherlessness and divorce, authoritarian relationships and abuse. But broken relationships aren't limited to the home: We see racism, tribalism, and sexism turning relationships upside down at a culture-wide level. These can manifest in truly horrific ways, from rape to human trafficking to acts of terror. It is heartbreaking, the level of unforgiveness, selfishness, hatred, prejudice, and jealousy that exists between human beings. It is tragic, the consequences of our world being turned upside down.

BROKEN SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS

If it wasn't enough that this upside-down world is marked by broken lives and broken relationships, upside-down people in upside-down relationships eventually organize themselves into upside-down structures, systems, and institutions. We see many examples in Scripture of fallen humanity building structures to their own glory over an all-powerful God. We see the beginnings of this in the attempt to build the tower of Babel.

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

Genesis 11:1-4

An upside-down people decide to make a name for themselves, the dysfunction of Cain on a system-wide scale. God scattered them to foil this upside-down

strategy based on upside-down thinking, but we'll see it again soon enough.

In the book of Exodus, we find another example of upside-down thinking. Pharaoh enslaves the Israelites out of fear of their population growth. The Israelites cry out to the one true God for deliverance, and God responds by demanding that this system be turned right side up.

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.

Exodus 3:7-9

In the wilderness God makes a covenant with the now-liberated Israelites and establishes a code for how they should live in relationship with God and with one another. But the insecurity of an upside-down world

causes the Israelites to seek their own way. While waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain with new instructions from God, the whole multitude of people participate in the upside-down act of idolatry.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.

Exodus 32:1-4

Even when we experience God's deliverance, it's still possible to participate in upside-down corporate practices. Today, we are surrounded by broken systems and institutions: government systems, school systems, corporate systems, and economic systems. My experiences as an urban youth pastor and church planter provided me with an up-close understanding of how

such broken systems and institutions work. While I was an urban youth pastor, I was also a high school basketball coach, and I watched as public school superintendents came and went in short periods of time. School board meetings seemed to be more about political-party agendas than urban children and their families. The school board would decide to close a school, and then a few years later we would have schools that were overcrowded. The schools in predominantly African American and lower-income neighborhoods were less resourced than those in predominantly white and upper-middle-income neighborhoods. Our public school system had a board and superintendent who were at odds, a teachers union that wasn't happy, complex political dynamics, and disparities in how funds were allocated. Some of the schools in our lower-income neighborhoods began to close or become alternative schools. Some parents in those neighborhoods began to send their children to private or suburban schools. Tax dollars often followed those children, contributing to a broken economic system.

I began to realize that in order to understand what was going on in the public schools and how that was impacting urban youth and families to whom I was connected as a youth pastor and basketball coach, I had to learn more about our educational, political, and economic systems. These broken systems were directly connected to struggling individuals, families,

and institutions. Because I also had grown up in this community, I came to the understanding that there had been something going on in my city systemically for a long time. The city I grew up in, the city that was home to the young people I pastored, was upside-down.

With a team of mostly volunteers I sought to develop a right-side-up youth ministry that not only focused on evangelism and discipleship *to* urban youth, but also engaged broken systems and structures *on behalf of* urban youth. I realized eventually that my calling at the time was not just to minister to urban youth but also to train both youth and adults to seek to transform the upside-down systems and institutions that young people and their families were navigating on a daily basis. This kind of commitment would take a life of dying to self in order to discover a more revolutionary purpose.

When I was the youth pastor at Park Avenue United Methodist Church in South Minneapolis, I actually named our youth ministry the Park Avenue Youth Revolution. We were committed to being a ministry that raised up young heroes for God in an upside-down reality. I believed that if God could use young people in the Bible such as David, Esther, and Jeremiah to confront and transform the upside-down realities of idolatry, exile, and war, then surely God could use our urban youth as change agents in our upside-down world today.

This is not just a call for youth ministry leaders. Parents, coaches, teachers, and volunteer tutors who are committed to the right-side-up life in the Kingdom of God can equip young people as heroes for God in an upside-down world. Young people today must be conscious of, and empowered to deal with, the sinful and upside-down systems that are slowly and silently killing us.

An upside-down world organizes itself to function as effectively and efficiently as possible. This is the ultimate extrapolation of our individual brokenness—personal sin metastasizing in sinful systems that foster further personal and relational sin. It's a Bizarro trinity, a twisted version of God's vision for humanity. No wonder the world is killing us—it's not the world we were made for.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What examples of broken systems and institutions have you observed in your everyday life? What impact have you seen their brokenness have on individuals and families?

What role does your faith play in how you relate to the people in your community? What role does faith play in how you interact with institutions and other cultural forces where you live?