

“STANDING ON OUR HEADS WITH JESUS”

Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

September 24, 2006

The Rev. Ryan Lambert

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“What is that when I put my head down and don’t stand on my feet?” A few weeks ago Grace asked this question, and it took a moment or two for me to recognize that she was talking about a headstand, which is, at the moment one of her favorite things to do. So at almost any moment we find her leaning upside-down against any piece of furniture that will hold her up. I tell you this not just because I have a captive audience for a “listen to what Grace did” story, but instead because I thought of a headstand when I read the scripture lessons for today. For some of you it has probably been a long time since your last headstand, but as someone who tried one this week I am here to tell you that things look a little different when your eyes are just a couple inches off the ground and you are looking up at everything you normally walk right past. In the middle of my headstand, before the spots appeared in my eyes, I remembered how valuable seeing things from a different perspective could be.

The ministry of Jesus was, I believe, a ministry based on looking at things from a different point of view. Jesus repeatedly tries to get the disciples to look at things through a lens they had never looked through before. But, of course, it isn’t until he has been crucified that they really come to understand who and what he is. But even though the disciples were at times a rather dense bunch, it should not take away from *our* recognition of the radical message of both the teachings of Jesus, and more importantly perhaps, the unique and challenging call to follow in his footsteps. Thus, the dense response of the disciples aside, as I read the scripture lessons for this week, I could not help but think that Jesus might possibly have been history’s first gymnast, standing on his head so that he could see the world and its people from a different perspective.

The gospel reading for today includes the second of three passion predictions in Mark’s gospel, then an argument among the disciples concerning which of them was the greatest, and finally the iconic picture of Jesus welcoming the child in an effort to help the disciples understand what his ministry was really all about. The interplay between these three is really the crucial element of this lesson, because it is here that Jesus announces what is to become of him. But the disciples remain unfazed by it all, because rather than spurring disbelief or outrage among the disciples, their only reaction is to engage in a debate about their own status and importance. Mark often depicts the disciples as not quite “getting it,” but in this case the reaction of the disciples doesn’t seem like it has any grounding in reality. Just who are these guys? Have they been listening at all? Jesus has just announced that he will soon be killed and rise again, and all they can do is talk about themselves? This has to be one of the disciples’ greatest moments of ineptitude; but rather than being angry, Jesus seizes upon their ineptitude and makes a “teaching moment” out of it.

As if to shake up the disciples, or perhaps to rattle them a little, Jesus welcomes a child into their midst and calls upon them to do the same. I remember reading this passage in my church school days, complete with a felt board depiction of the events, and this passage is repeatedly trotted out when we speak of the gentle nature of Jesus. However, when we use this story to create a “Hallmark-perfect” image of Jesus—all gentle and mild—I think we really miss the point of this lesson. Instead of being all warm and fuzzy, what Jesus was

doing was really quite shocking. Remember, in biblical times not only were children expected to be seen, but not heard; they had no status at all. Surely they were beloved by their family; but in truth, they were subject to the authority of their fathers and viewed as little more than property. And thus, when Jesus welcomes a child into that circle of friends, what he does is create a place for the weakest member of society in his inner-most circle. Not only is there a place for the child there, but Jesus also says that accepting this unimportant member of society in his name is equivalent to accepting Jesus himself. The call to follow Jesus then implies giving status to those who have no status in society and welcoming them into the fold. This passage is a picture perfect example of Jesus changing the way of the world, as if he were standing on his head looking at things from a perspective unseen by anyone else. We see Jesus as a model of radical inclusiveness, but for the disciples and the others who walked with Jesus this is a moment when everything they have known about status and power is interrupted, and by a child no less. Remember those he taught were Jewish; and thus the laws of the time had great power. But instead of quoting law to the disciples, Jesus welcomed the least powerful member of society into his circle and changed the dynamics of faith, power, and prestige forever.

In our lesson from James, we find an extrapolation of the teachings of Jesus. Here James is trying to extol virtuous living to what scholars tell us was the church in Jerusalem. With a full Bible in front of us this passage allows us to hear echoes of the Sermon on the Mount and the “fruits of the spirit” as depicted by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. In this passage it is James who builds on the idea that choosing a different viewpoint is critical for a person seeking to be faithful to the scriptures. James writes, “For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” These are words that are clearly counter-cultural in our age and obviously James believed they addressed the state of affairs in the years shortly after Jesus was killed. James wrote these words hoping that his followers in the early church would understand that there is a difference between that which is “of the world”—with its personal and ego-driven priorities—and that which is granted through the wisdom of God—those things which are pure, peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy. As James articulates this difference, I can only assume that his audience struggled with how to make sense of how he was asking them to prioritize their lives. It is no different now. In an era where the Gospel is polluted by those who would preach the “prosperity gospel”: that God wants you to have a Rolex, a big house, and anything else you may want; I think it is easy to see how the early church would struggle to understand how to live in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. This was the church, removed only a few years from the life of Jesus, but struggling to adapt to a new vantage point. James writes to them in the midst of their struggle, reminding them that the legalisms of their ancient laws have now given way to a Gospel that focuses on behavior toward one another.

While these lessons individually call upon us to seek a different view of God’s world, it is when we look at them together that these lessons form a pretty compelling model for personal living, a compelling rebuke of the prosperity gospel, and perhaps an understanding of an ethic for inter-faith and international existence.

First, I believe these passages speak to the individual. They speak to us and remind us that we are not the central focus of the gospel. Instead, the gospel calls us to live with the other in mind. In fact, our gospel reading for today calls upon us to live with a mentality that recognizes our responsibility for those who are the “least” among us. Now as I say this, I struggle with this language a bit and note that this “least” isn’t a

label I (or we) hang on someone, but instead it is a label that our society anoints rather indiscriminately, and it is one that has a changing face. At different times “the least” have been children, ethnic or racial groups, the homeless, those with diseases, orphans, those who speak languages other than our own. However they have come to be labeled as such, we always seem to have a “least”; and the ministry of Jesus challenges us not just to respond to “the least,” but to actually see the world through their eyes. The ministry of Jesus calls us to see the world from an upside-down place, so that our assumptions, our bigotry, our ego, and our status (both deserved and undeserved) do not block our view of the gospel. From this place the gospel does not allow us to be self-centered; and we cannot mistakenly think that following the gospel is about getting things, status, or power. It is clearly not about us at all but, instead, about our relationship to each other.

From these passages we are thus called upon to address the needs of others in small ways, in big ways, and even in some dangerous and scary ways. Small and local ways include filling up the food barrel, slicing vegetables for a Stone Soup meal, volunteering time in local schools, coaching youth teams, teaching church school, supporting Community Outreach and Circle of Hope—just to name a few. Then there are the big ways; voting for candidates who will fight for services for those most in need, supporting organizations that make differences in global ways, living with ecology in mind so that future generations can enjoy the same water, air, and beautiful places that we do, living peacefully with our neighbors (both locally and globally) so that we contribute to global peace-making efforts rather than to local or international division. And the list goes on. And finally, there are the dangerous and scary ways also. For instance, our own country is currently detaining 14,000 people under the auspices of the “war on terror” and they (we) are keeping them in places where they are not subject to the privileges of the American legal system. We label them as “terrorists,” but I think that Jesus might label them as “the least.” From the upside-down place the Gospel takes us, I believe the church should have something to say about these people, too. But be careful: speaking for justice is dangerous and scary.

Fundamentally, I believe we are called to be theological gymnasts, turning our own experiences on end so that we can see the world from a different perspective. I am convinced that the gospel will stay the same no matter from where (and from what contorted position) I choose to view it. But no matter how much I desire to ignore it, the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to look for those who are being exploited and used, those who are being maligned and forgotten, those who are being tortured and jailed, those who are starving and cold, those whom we would much rather ignore—and to speak for them, to feed them, to help them. As much as I poke fun at the disciples for their “dense” behavior, I also love that they never do quite get it. It is their ineptitude that gives me hope for myself and for our world. It gives me hope that somehow in the midst of ego and laziness, in the midst of rushing from appointment to appointment, in the midst of being too busy to *really* see those in need; that somehow I too will have another chance to get it right.

John F. Kennedy Jr. once said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” As Christians we might adapt that statement this way: “Ask not what God can do for you, but what you can do for God.” And so I ask you, into what upside-down place are you being called? The gospel and God’s people everywhere are calling. Come, stand on your head, listen...and respond!

Thanks be to God! Amen.