



August 26, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 13:10-17

"Standing Up Straight"

I have dealt with chronic back pain through much of my life. It began when I was just a teenager, becoming more persistent and intense at different times—following a car accident, during pregnancy, as my body aged or when I began a new hobby like gardening.

It's been a real PAIN in every sense of the word. Eventually I was diagnosed with the mysterious malady known as “fibromyalgia”, and with medication and exercise I have found significant relief.

I am sensitive to situations and circumstances where people have hurting backs. Three of my children have faced back pain and one has had surgery. I hurt for and with every one of them. I hate the fact that they have not escaped the pain I've had.

Through the years, as I've wandered through art museums in various cities, I have been struck by depictions of people planting or harvesting fields. They are so bent over, their knees usually straight, that my back hurts just looking

at the pictures. Then I get to thinking about people around the world who still plant and harvest by hand, and I'm sad to think of all the pain that people bear.

Being bent over hurts. It hurts when we are literally bent over physically, when our backs send pain shooting through our bodies, and it hurts when we are bent over in emotional and spiritual ways.

I had physical back pain begin when I was a teenager. About the same time I faced a situation that might seem very trivial, but which caused me a great deal of emotional pain. When I was a young teenager, none of my clothes seemed to fit. This was back in the days when women's blouses and dresses had darts sewn in them, to make them more fitted to a woman's figure. I was tall enough that I needed to buy women's clothing. But I was still a girl—all angles—not yet a woman with curves. It was horrible. I felt self-conscious in everything I wore. The detestable darts sagged and drooped and made me look like a clown, I thought. I wasn't aware that I was doing it, but I began to PHYSICALLY slouch forward. It was an unconscious protective response. I felt inadequate, inferior, unacceptable and bent over INSIDE. My mother was continually reminding me to, “stand up straight”.

Oh, my friends, life can hurt so much. There is so much that can beat us up, crush us down. We receive so many messages about how much is wrong with us. We are rejected and wounded. Words from friends, suggesting we “hang in there”, don't always help. We may find ourselves, like the “bent over woman” in Luke's gospel, plodding along bent over and burdened year after year after year after year.

What can help us? Jesus can. The first good news message I find in this story is the fact that Jesus does not want us to be bent over. He wants to help us “stand up straight”. He doesn’t offer us twelve handy methods to **endure being bent over**. He rejects the ways the world wants to keep us bent over. He says, “to hell with your rules” to his critics. “What’s wrong with you? Don’t you know what matters to God? God wants to help and heal us- to make us whole.”

What can help us stand up straighter?

I’d like to focus on five messages that come to us through Scripture which help us overcome the pain and trials of life.

I expect some of you have traveled to Canada from the U.S. Did you notice that there are five questions they ask you before they let you across the border? When we travel to Canada, we all have various answers to these questions. But they are, interestingly, actually ultimate questions as well, and God’s answers to these questions can change our lives.

These are the five questions:

Who are you?

Where do you come from?

Where are you going?

What is your purpose?

How long will you be?

First: Who are you?

We can answer that in many ways. We may give our names, describe our jobs or professions, name the people we are related to, or our political outlook. But I’ve changed my name in my life, from Looker to Verboom. I’ve had a number of jobs.

My political outlook is refined and shaped by life experiences. If all these things change, am I no longer ME?

No. I will always be ME. And **who am I? A child of God.** As the reading from Jeremiah describes it, I am God's own, known and made by him as a treasure. I am a daughter of the most Sacred, Holy, and Loving One that exists. A child of the Power that made the universe. I am somebody really special. No matter how my clothes fit. No matter who divorces or rejects me. I am a child of God.

Where do you come from?

We sometimes name a town or city or state. But many folks have moved a lot in their lives, and aren't really sure which to claim—the place they were born? Or the place where they graduated from high school? Or the place where they currently reside? Actually, in our nation many of us identify ourselves and the place we come from as the one place we may never have been: we are Asian-Americans, Irish-Americans, African-Americans and so forth. But God's message to us is this: we **come from a long line of people seeking to know and serve God.** We are part of the vast community of God's people. Once we were no people, but now we are God's people. We belong to him and to each other. We are not alone.

Where are you going?

We chase along life's road much of the time. But where are we going? We hope we are moving towards happiness and prosperity. We may see ourselves climbing a ladder. Various life events may make it seem more like a roller coaster: up then down, up and down again.

Faith tells us that our destination is much like where we are right now.

You see, wherever we are, God is. A life of faith is lived knowing that there is no road we may travel, no matter what twists or bumps we encounter, that does not

lead us into the divine presence. Since we are there, no matter where we are, maybe we can relax and stop running and struggling so much.

What is your purpose?

This haunts us all at some points in our lives. We keep wondering what we will be when we grow up. Or we become what we planned to be and then think, so now what? As a girl I had Roman Catholic friends who studied a very precise catechism. They memorized verbatim answers to these kinds of ultimate questions. I was fascinated. The Catholics had answers! But I was disappointed by some of them. “What is your purpose?” as I recall, was answered, “to glorify God”. This seemed so dull to me—a life of reading the Bible in a dark room, praying stuffy prayers, singing boring songs.

But the Catholics have it right on this one. Our purpose IS to glorify God, in whatever unique and fascinating ways God shows us. We glorify God by entering into and nourishing relationships of love with others. We glorify God by noticing beauty around us and opening all our senses to it, with gratitude toward the Creator. Our purpose is to glorify God by loving God and our neighbors as ourselves. And this is not a boring activity, but the most thrilling life has to offer.

How long will you be?

This is not a question we like to ponder. Human mortality, the sure and certain end of our earthly lives is not pleasant to contemplate. The Christians’ great key to peace is that Christ has given us the answer. Through his sacrificial love he gives us eternal life. “How long will we be?” We will be forever.

Friends, life can be hard. We hurt. We suffer blows that bend us over. But Jesus is with us and will bring us his help and healing, so that we can stand up straight. As

you grapple with the struggles of life, your own, or those of loved ones and friends,
do you **proclaim the messages of our faith?**

**We are children of the Sacred One, we come from a long line of people
seeking to live in faith and love, we are always in and always going into the
divine presence, our purpose is to glorify God by our love, and we will have
eternity to do that.**

Embrace these truths. Teach and share these truths. And our backs will grow
straighter and stronger day by day. AMEN!