

“How’s Your Stiff Neck?”

“What’s this all about?” was the gist of the reaction to today’s Second Lesson by one of our members. It does have an odd ring to it. ***“Caught up in the third heaven”***? What does that mean? ***“in the body or out of the body”***? Which is it? Does it matter? ***“caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat”***? Is this something we need to listen to?

William Loader observes: *“It is Paul's rhetorical ploy to save his embarrassment, that he speaks of someone other than himself when he is really reporting his own experiences (12:2-5). In the ancient world to have had such experiences indicated divine favor. So Paul is arguing his value and status here. He shares some Jewish views of the heavenly world of his time according to which there are many layers in the heavenly world or many heavens. In his vision or somehow (Paul deliberately leaves it open how this might have been), Paul was taken on a spiritual journey. It all sounds rather fantastic. Why don't we hear more of this in Paul? Why is it not a feature of his defense elsewhere and his wish for others? The answer lies in what follows.*

Paul does not deny such experiences, but he denies that they are central. Christianity is not about 'highs'. It reminds us of 1 Corinthians 13 where he had to argue that all such experiences mean nothing without something more fundamental: love. In 12:6-7 Paul begins undermining the inflationary effect of reporting spiritual experiences. Paul does not want to be put on a pedestal. He wants to be accepted for who he is, not more — and not less! In fact, he is quite uncomfortable playing games for purposes of status . . .”

What I wish to focus on in this account is the reasons why Paul felt he had to write about this.

The Corinthians had fixated on one aspect of spiritual life: ecstatic experiences (what one scholar I know calls *“the ‘wow!’ factor”*). What

they thought mattered was whether or not the person who claimed authority had enough of such experiences to elevate him or her to the level of believable. Leadership in the church has been under debate ever since.

In his classic work, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, (now there's a title!) Hans von Campenhausen (now there's a name!) argues that this was the ongoing tension within the early church. Indeed, it was part of what Luther was reacting to in the sixteenth century that led him to articulate what I've mentioned before: "the theology of the cross" (which Luther considered to be Paul's position) over against a "theology of glory," one feature of which was this idea that ecstatic experiences are what give authority and power. It continues today in many circles of the Church among those denominations and para-denominational organizations which insist that the lack of such experiences disqualifies you from ministry [I heard of one such Pentecostal pastor who had never had the experience of speaking in tongues — absolutely required to be a pastor in that church body — so he learned to speak the Lord's Prayer in the Cherokee language and convinced those around him it was speaking in tongues].

This is but a part of the same nexus of thought that both Ezekiel and Jesus would face. In the case of Ezekiel, it was a long-standing reaction of the people of Israel to any prophetic message that was not affirming. Scattered throughout the populace, and especially in royal palaces, were to be found what in Hebrew are called *nabi* — self-proclaimed prophets, in some cases; in other cases, dynasties of professional soothsayers. Ezekiel does not fit that mold, so God has to challenge him to take on the role which God knows will be met with resistance and rejection.

This was true of every one of the prophets we read about in the Old Testament. That fact would cause Jesus to gaze upon the holy city and weep: ***“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you***

were not willing!” [Luke 13:34] As early as Moses, God was warning: ***“I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are.”*** [Exodus 32:9] So God prepares Ezekiel to know what is coming his way: ***“I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn.”*** It’s almost as if God were telling Ezekiel: ***“Don’t expect much success. In fact, expect just the opposite.”*** Imagine yourself at a job interview where the Human Resources person tells you: ***“You got the job, You start on Monday. Within a month you’ll be sick of it, if the job doesn’t kill you first.”*** With what level of anticipation would you show up on Monday?

Old Testament becomes the New Testament and Jesus confronts very similar resistance and rejection. In Jesus’ case, it may have been (or at least seemed) worse because it was directed or occasioned by his family. Mark’s Gospel records how His family had tried to get Him out of His Father’s business. In Mark 3:21, they had come to get him because they thought he had ***“gone out of his mind.”*** Then later, in 3:31, they try to get Him away from the crowds, but He rebuffs these attempts. Now here Jesus confronts the people of His hometown, whose basic response to Him is (as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it): ***“Who does he think he is?”***

Time after time in Mark’s Gospel people are amazed, astonished, blown away, befuddled by Jesus’ words and actions. But now, among people who know Him, he is rejected — apparently for being from the family He was raised in. ***“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”*** Now, I find it interesting that Mark records only the parentage of Mary — because John tells us that Jesus’ opponents accused Jesus of being an illegitimate bastard (redundant, I know) and not to be accepted on that basis alone. The folks of Nazareth appear to reject Jesus not on that basis alone (although as Mark tells it, it does seem to be part of the mix), but more on the basis of: ***“We know this guy! How can He be the one we’ve longed for? The Messiah will come from David — that means Jerusalem, not Nazareth!”***

It goes deeper yet. Mark writes: “***And they took offense at him.***” (καὶ ἐσκανδαλίζοντο ἐν αὐτῷ kai eskandalizonto en auto). I have insisted before that “offense,” as a Biblical and theological concept, means much more than having your feelings hurt or getting your nose bent out of shape. The Greek verb, from which we get the word “scandal,” means “*to trip over.*” And it’s telling us that these people were shaken to the core of their beliefs by what Jesus had to say. This goes way deeper than just “*how can the hometown boy make good?*” This is the stuff that leads to stoning (an attempt at which will come later in Jesus’ ministry).

What we see in the people of Nazareth is yet another example of stiff-necked behavior. “*We know what’s what, and anything that doesn’t agree with what we know cannot be considered.*” The very image of “stiff-necked people” implies rigidity of thought and behavior. Tunnel vision . . . blinders on full-time . . . no ifs or ands, and should you try, it will be your butt.

Jesus then commissions His disciples into this very ministry. Had I been one of those disciples, I think I might have a question: “*Are you out of your mind? Really? You want us to climb on board this bus that’s obviously headed over a cliff?*”

Then Jesus tacks on a few extra provisions: one of which is no provisions. You can take stuff to travel with — but no bread, no bag, no money. There are specific things you are to do when you get there, and specific things you most certainly are not to do. Oh, yes . . . and expect rejection, and here’s what to do about that.

At some point in the (we hope not too distant) future this congregation will be in a position to call a new Pastor. I doubt it would be wise for you to place an addendum to the Call Document that reads: “*Salary: nil, but there is a car allowance. We expect you to forage for food and to live on next to nothing. When you get here, we will try to house you; and that arrangement will stay in place unless and until you say or do something that bothers your hosts. We demand that you bring in new members, but we know this community and really expect that you will fail in that*

endeavor. Oh, well.” I doubt that you would get a positive response to such a call document, because I’m absolutely sure that the Boards of Assignments at both seminaries would place that document into the dustbin.

And so the New Testament yields to the present day, and the reason for my sermon title today: *“How’s Your Stiff Neck?”* That is predicated on the belief on my part that every one of us has some dimension of stiff-neckedness. Some part of our thinking and/or doing has become rigid, and is engaged in without conscious or rational thought. It is a thought or action that you have accepted as always right and therefore never to be questioned. And should anyone dare to call it into question, your reaction would be an immediate, *“You’re wrong!”* and that would be a judgment not on the value of the idea, but the value of the person who posited the idea.

Garrison Keillor tells of the time when Father Ulmer was changing the light bulbs in the ceiling of the Church of Our Lay of Perpetual Responsibility in Lake Woebegone when the ladder fell against the hard oak pews, making not so much as a dent. Father Ulmer wasn’t too sure it would have made a difference if there had been people sitting in the pews at the time.

So, someone may well ask, *“Okay, Pastor, where do you get your neck stiff?”* I knew that question was coming, and so I thought about it quite a bit this week . . . and my considered answer is *“I don’t know.”* I suspect this is true of each of us: as we try to examine where our rigidity gets in the way, we cannot see it . . . because our rigidity gets in the way. I’d like to believe that I am a most open-minded person . . . then I think of a line from comedian Tom Lehrer: *“I know there are people in this world who do not love their fellow-man . . . and I hate people like that!”* It is much easier to see this in someone else than to make note of it in yourself.

That being the case, this becomes a community condition. Note well: Jesus sent out the disciples *“two by two”*; there’s a reason for that. Protection may have been part of the picture; the roads in Jesus’ day were

not places to travel alone (see the story of the Good Samaritan, which, in addition to being parable, could have been the report of an actual occurrence). But more likely is the circumstance that Jesus knows that doing ministry requires ongoing and lively support.

A prophetic ministry demands even more of this kind of back-up. Think back to Elijah, after the powerful demonstration of God's power over Baal on Mt. Carmel, when he was forced to flee from the wrath of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and, feeling all alone in the wilderness, heard the voice of God say to him: ***"I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."***

Or recall the words of Jesus, how He several times chided the disciples for leaving Him, but took comfort in the fact that God never left Him alone, and then makes this promise to His disciples, both then and now: ***"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."***

Jesus knows our need is not to be alone . . . and for that reason has given us one another. Many of you have expressed an understanding of that, telling me how you give thanks for the friends you have here at church and their importance to you (but I feel a need to interject here that the reason for being in worship is to worship — that is, to place all our focus on God — and not to build or restore friendship connections, but that is a laudable and important byproduct of coming together). What is essential for that support is a true sense of openness and a developed sense of vision for mission and ministry.

It has been said that there are seven words that have often most hindered any church's growth: *"We've never done it that way before."* (Or conversely, *"We've always done it this way before."*) Those are "stiff-necked" words and betray a "stiff-necked" attitude. We need to open ourselves up to new possibilities, new directions, new ideas, new people . . . and that can be unnerving.

But latching onto stiff-necked postures simply gets in the way of

ministry. Look at what happened in Nazareth: Jesus ***“could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them”*** (recall that earlier Mark had recorded how entire towns and villages had flocked to Jesus and He cured all their illnesses and injuries). All because people got stuck in their thinking about what God could and could not do (or, more likely, what they thought God should and should not be doing).

Ezekiel, Paul, Jesus all came up against resistance and rejection (and quite a bit more on top of it) — still the Kingdom keeps coming. We are the extension of the Kingdom in this place. We must decide whether we will act like ***“a nation of rebels . . . impudent and stubborn”*** or become the vehicles through whom God works His will. We can sit still . . . or we can get moving.

Right now do me just one favor: move that head about just a tad and tell me: *“How’s your stiff neck?”*

Amen.