

## ***Upside Down to See Right Side Up***

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Have you ever seen the world upside down? More precisely, have you ever been upside down to see what the world looks like from that orientation? I never have, either. But friends of ours, their youngest son would regularly walk on his hands around the room. He is still like that, 8 years later – strong, adventurous.

It must be disorienting, at least at first. Looking at the world upside down, or from an upside down perspective.

Let me take a moment with that imagining for a moment – standing on your head, or somehow turning your head upside down. <sup>1</sup> The bottom line is, our eyes most often, eventually, adjust. It's amazing how many of us have developed the ability to read documents that are upside down – teachers enjoy this semi-secret superpower. Researchers actually studied this in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, putting on special goggles that gave the subject of the study the sense that the world was flipped upside down. At first, they were disoriented, but eventually the brain adapted.

The brain is marvellous, isn't it? It adapts to the change, reverting back to what we know. But that moment of disorientation, the unlearning moment, is of interest to me. I think that the new vision of Jesus, a shaking up of his Judaism, maintaining the essential laws but challenging how the law is applied to everyday life. Loving God and loving neighbour – no one would argue. But the way we apply those fundamentals to our everyday choices, that is where faithful Jews, and I would dare say we faithful modern Christians, tend to miss the point.

I didn't appreciate until recently how yoga practitioners often intentionally go upside down, and recommend some form of inverting the body as integral to daily practice. One teacher said that, "regular and precise practice...develops the body, disciplines the mind, and widens the horizons of the spirit (p. 190)."<sup>2</sup>

Disorienting spiritual practitioners intentionally. I think that that was what Jesus did, theologically. Daring to see the world differently, well, not just differently but turning everything, absolutely everything – logic, common sense, concepts of success and failure – all of it, Jesus turned it on its head.

Think about all his parables as we hear them through the 4 Gospel writers. That prodigal son – the self centred, lying brother who manipulated dad into giving him the inheritance early, then spends it all. It seems logical to assess that kid as weak, undisciplined. He makes us, the listeners, mad, disrespecting his father and tradition. We judge who is good, what is good and righteous living, but then Jesus turns it upside down. The hard working, devoted older son ends up looking like the whiny one. The younger son, repentant, humble, the hero.

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<sup>1</sup> Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century experiment to determine whether or not eyes can adjust to Inside those goggles, specially arranged mirrors flipped the light that would reach Kohler's eyes, top becoming bottom, and bottom top.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/nov/12/improbable-research-seeing-upside-down>

<sup>2</sup> "Seeing Life Upside Down." December 8, 2011. Sarah Kass. <https://www.saybrook.edu/blog>

Jesus has a way of doing that, making us say, “I didn’t see that coming!” If we are to follow him, we are to learn to expect the unexpected, to be prepared for disorientation, because our moral compasses get skewed by the world we live in. Our binary understandings of the world – success and failure, strength and weakness, us and them – are formed by such simplistic assessments because life is fast; we are told that we don’t have time to sit with the complexities.

Did you learn to see the world in binary terms – it is either one or another? Hero or villain. All or nothing. Rich or poor. Good... Bad.

Jesus isn’t saying that the hero is actually a villain and the villain hero. He is just saying, and I paraphrase, “Don’t judge the book by its cover.” Don’t judge, period. Walk in that person’s footwear for a few minutes, understand. Have compassion and hold your judgment long enough to try to figure out how God sees them, not how the world sees them.

Life is not at all simple, straightforward. I have to tell you that I am learning to think in terms of continuum. Gender identity, ethnicity, neurodiversity. I am regularly being gently educated by people around me about proper terminology, about how important pronouns are, and that I’m not the one to define another person’s identity based on what the world taught me when I was a child.

I make mistakes regularly, and I feel some embarrassment each time when either someone corrects me, or I realize after the fact that I applied my default binary template to a situation. But how does God see that person who identifies with the pronoun they or them rather than a he or a she? I may not understand that person’s reality, but then, if I consider for a moment the sheer scale of this marvel called earth, the diversity, the complexity, the number of strange exceptions to the rules that science, philosophy, even history that evolves regularly when we see through the experience of the Samaritans of our world.

The essential ethic of loving God, and loving our neighbour as we first must feel love for ourselves, that I think is a call to engage in some regular theological yoga – inverting ourselves especially in times when we are angry, confused or maybe even feeling a bit ignorant in a moment, we ask: How can I see this person not with judgment, but seeing this person the way God sees them – beautiful. Amen.