

Stumbling Blocks

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."
Mark 9:38-50

We've had a few stumbling blocks at church recently. Lightning struck the tree and bell tower earlier this summer. Lightning struck again when I was on vacation, zapping the Comcast equipment and the phone system, among other things. Then this past week we learned that one of our air conditioning units is broken and needs replacement. I say these are stumbling blocks because they are interfering in the work of the parish. We've had to spend time and resources on dealing with these unexpected problems that we could have spent on mission or evangelism, pastoral care, or long-range planning. Stumbling blocks are everywhere.

The pint of ice cream in the freezer is a stumbling block for me. The black hole that is the internet can cause many of us to stumble as we lose all sense of time and get nothing done. Stumbling blocks can keep us from going to the gym or making a phone call to a lonely relative. They can keep us from signing up for a Bible study class, a volunteer opportunity, or making a commitment to giving to the church or other non-profit for the good of the community.

Stumbling blocks are scattered across the floor of our relationships, where we stump our toes or crack our ankles all too often on our resentments, anger, and inability to forgive one another. We use them to blame others for our own shortcomings and mistakes. They interfere with God's work among us, and in our church, and in our individual lives.

In today's gospel Jesus talks about stumbling blocks. It's a continuation of last week's story in Mark. You may remember that the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest and Jesus admonished them by using a little one, a child, to make his point that they were called to be last of all and servant of all. But the disciples, as so often happens, didn't get the point, didn't absorb the teaching because they are again misunderstanding their mission, they refuse to hear Jesus

telling them for the second of three times that he will suffer, be rejected, die and be resurrected. It's just too hard to accept a reality that's just not what we want.

Not only did they not hear Jesus telling them to welcome the little ones, they began to act like children. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Just listen to these disciples this week! They are tattling, they are whining, they are being territorial, they are gate keeping. Doesn't sound like they want to share Jesus at all! The fact that this outsider was not one of them was apparently their stumbling block, a challenge to their authority and recognition. And did you notice that they tried to stop the outsider because he was not following them? Not Jesus, but them?

This is not unfamiliar behavior to us. We've all engaged in it, and we are seeing it around us all the time. Whose side are we on? Who will we follow, help, vote for, include, promote? It's easy to make the other, the ones not like us, into stumbling blocks; blaming them for our own mistakes and problems.

Jesus sees the danger of this kind of behavior right away, whether we are stumbling blocks to another or to ourselves. Jesus knows that the greatest stumbling blocks are found inside of our own hearts, whether they be anger, judgment, jealousy, greed, racism, pride, or fear. Jesus sees the danger and knows the potential for harm, and he speaks strong words of warning to the disciples, words we might also need to hear. Cutting off a hand or a foot, tearing out an eye – these are harsh preventative even if interpreted metaphorically. Jesus, remember, is a master of hyperbole, but he makes his point.

We sense the urgency in his words, the importance of God's kingdom, the call to pay attention to what is imperative. Jesus calls us to look at the stumbling blocks we put in front of ourselves and others, those words and actions (or absence of words and actions) that get in the way of our relationship with God and build walls that keep out those who seek God.

We might be distracted by deferred maintenance on the stones of our church building, we can harden our hearts into stone and refuse to love our neighbors as ourselves, we may stumble into patterns of life that make it all too easy to distance ourselves from our faith practices.

Who or what have been stumbling blocks for you? How did they cause you to stumble or fall? And the harder question – how might you be a stumbling block for another?

Jesus' words for us today are difficult, but they are redemptive. Life is filled with stumbling blocks. I don't think that Jesus is condemning us with his words, but rather helping us see where we stumble, and then calling us to justice, compassion, and love. The good news is that through his suffering, death and resurrection Jesus has removed any walls, anything that separates us from God. As individuals, as the Church, we are called to no less as followers of Jesus. Amen.