

## The removal of Stumbling Blocks

Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Thomas C. Pumphrey, September 30, 2018  
(Proper 21, year B), Mark 9:38-50

*Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV): 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."*

I once discussed this gospel passage with several clergy friends of mine. One of them said this was the passage about "Pirate Christians." "Pirates?" We asked. "Yes," he said, "because these are the folks with the wooden leg, the hook hand and the patch over one eye!" The rest of us replied "Arghh!"

I think the pirate image gives us one look into Jesus' words this morning. His words are a bit shocking, and we get so distracted by their graphic nature that we don't quite know how to respond. Most of us have more sins than we care to admit. Did Jesus really say we're supposed to hack ourselves to bits?

The reason this sounds so surprising is that we know a lot about Jesus and his teachings from the rest of the New Testament. We know a lot about God from the Bible, and we understand the Bible through the teachings of the church. The church from its earliest times condemned harming ones-self or self-mutilation. They taught this because of Jesus' teaching about grace. So something else must be going on here.

Perhaps Jesus is challenging our ability to blame our sin elsewhere—to dodge our responsibility for our wrongdoing by saying "my feet just took me there" or "I couldn't stop my fist." No, if we really wanted to blame pieces of ourselves, we would end up like Pirates, all hacked to pieces. If we want to deal with sin we have to own it entirely. The fault doesn't lie in our hands or our eyes or our feet—the fault lies in us. And maybe that's why this passage sounds so scary.

Because this is such an exaggeration, however, we often dismiss this passage of scripture, and that could be a big mistake. Perhaps Jesus is doing what he often does, using strong and shocking language to get our attention and shake us out of our complacency.

Jesus spoke against being a stumbling block to those who minister in his name. He spoke against putting a stumbling block in the way of those who believe in him. And he demands in vivid terms that we tolerate no stumbling block between us and God. Jesus takes stumbling blocks seriously. Jesus wants us to take stumbling blocks seriously.

So what gets in the way of our complete devotion to God? In the first century, Christians lived according to very different standards than the pagan culture that surrounded them. Becoming a Christian meant giving up a lot of the pagan lifestyle. Does our love of our lifestyle become a stumbling block for us? If so, says Jesus—cut it out.

For example, if mean-spirited political diatribe drives you into an angry rage—then log out of social media. If social norms prevent you from talking about God with your friends, then, by all means, be abnormal. If access to the internet feeds your addictions (and I can think of several kinds of addictions it can feed)—turn off the computer and shut down your phone. If your friends love alcohol more than they love you—get new friends. Indeed, recovering addicts know the pain of these kinds of decisions, but they also know the freedom and serenity they find when they get rid of the stumbling blocks between them and God.

God calls us to be self-giving in our relationships. God also wants us to take stock in what is life-giving and what is destructive in our lives. What stands in the way of our faithful discipleship? How can we follow Jesus more faithfully?

Perhaps there are things that are not so easily cut off or turned off, yet they still are stumbling blocks for our faith. What about our insecurity or our fears? With a focus on career and material needs, our insecurities can blind us to God's grace and God's blessings in our lives. Our social world can become so important that we fear losing friends or popularity. Those fears can paralyze us, and they are hard to cut away.

Perhaps we're afraid of God. Perhaps we've stumbled plenty of times and become stumbling blocks to others. Maybe that's why Jesus' words are so startling—because every one of us has stumbled and sinned, and if we take it seriously, that feels pretty scary.

Jesus takes stumbling block seriously. He wants us to get rid of the things that block us from God. But Jesus's work isn't about punishing us. Jesus is passionate about saving us—saving us from our sins and removing those stumbling blocks so that we can experience the fullness of life God wants for us. He wants nothing to get in the way of God's grace in our lives—God's abiding love for us.

Here's a different way to think about stumbling blocks. Many of us have heard stories like this one. A man is feeling a little tired lately, and he goes in to visit his doctor. One test leads to another, and the man finds out he has an artery in his heart that is 99% blocked. He is scheduled for an immediate open-heart surgery. His chest is sawed open, his heart opened up and hooked to machines, surgeons bi-pass the blockage and sew him back together again.

What a dramatic and painful and frightening thing to get rid of that blockage! But when he's recovered from that surgery, his heart is healthier, he has more energy and strength. Now he is full of life, whereas before, he was flirting with death. That's why Jesus is so strong in his words—not because he wants to punish us for our spiritual heart-blockage, but because of the life he wants to give us!

If you've tried and failed to get rid of those stumbling blocks, don't be afraid. Jesus came and died for us and rose again because none of us can really clear away all the stumbling blocks in our lives. But God can clear them away. Jesus calls us to put away the stumbling blocks. And when those blocks are too big to move, Jesus comes in and tears them down and sweeps them away.

I have seen teens turn their lives around by turning away from destructive friends and turning toward God and toward building positive and life-building friendships. We have seen those trapped by their fears and insecurities breathe more easily when they trust in God's grace and direction, even in difficult times. We even know those who are able to cut through political drama and help us to hear each other and understand each other, because they have felt God's grace and mercy bring reconciliation in their lives and they want to share that reconciliation with others.

Jesus doesn't want us to be "Pirate Christians." But Jesus does want us to be like the man who had open heart surgery. We may not have an eye patch and a wooden leg and a hook. But our lives will change. We do our best to cut down on spiritual fat & cholesterol, so to speak. We exercise in prayer and ministry and forgiveness and mercy. We bring all the spiritually heart-healthy habits into our lives. In the end, we open ourselves to the surgery that gives us life. We might be intimidated, but we need not fear when Jesus is the ultimate surgeon.

Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Jesus takes stumbling blocks seriously—and so should we. Get rid of whatever divides you from God and from others; get rid of the self-destructive habits in your life. And where those stumbling blocks are as big as millstones, let Jesus come and take them away. Let Jesus free you to live a life of joy and peace that passes understanding.