



“Stumbling Blocks”
Scripture – Mark 9:38-50
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 8, 2015

Episcopal priest, David Galloway, had just finished playing a round of golf with his three closest friends in Tyler, Texas. They stopped in the men's grill for some refreshments. The room was full of men bragging about their great round of golf – the spectacular shots they made and the long putts they sunk. In other words, they were all lying!

Into the room entered Hugh. Hugh was straight out of central casting for a Texas oil man: red-faced, large, and loud. Hugh was a back-slapping, heehawing fellow that everyone tried to avoid because he was overbearing and obnoxious.

Hugh strutted into the men's grill with a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other. He walked up to David's table and began thundering. Drawing the attention of everyone in the room, he bellowed at David, “You Episcopalians don't believe in the Bible, do you?!”

Rather than take the bait, David just looked at him and smiled weakly, hoping that would end it. Huge Hugh was referring to a recent decision by the Episcopal Church on some topic that was not to his liking. He went on, “David, I want to go to a church that is Bible-believing! Do you understand? A place where the preacher is not trying to tiptoe around the hard lessons of Jesus; a preacher who will lay it on the line, and not try to water down the Gospel. I want a preacher who will not let sinners slide. I want the full Gospel. I don't want a preacher to pussy-foot around the message of Jesus.”

David took a long sip from his glass, and said, “You want the full Gospel, Hugh? You mean the part about selling all you have and giving it to the poor?”

Silence fell over the room, and then hefty Hugh responded, “Well, not that part!”

The room broke up in laughter as Hugh slunk out of the room. Everyone rushed over to David to high-five him for putting Hugh in his place.

David went home that night a little taller than usual and related the whole story to his wife. She laughed at it, but then added, “David, what part of the Gospel do you avoid?”¹

Ouch! Could it be the part about self-righteousness?

There is the question for each of us: What part of the Gospel do you avoid? The danger of wealth? The call to forgive those who hurt you? The demand to care for the poor? Today's passage begins with the disciples complaining about someone who is healing people in the name of Jesus, because he is not one of their group. "Teacher," they say, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Jesus admonishes them for attempting to stop someone who is helping others simply because he is not one of their faction. There is a sermon there about the peril of circling the wagons too closely to home and excluding others, but that is not what called out to me as I wrestled with this text. The message that took hold of me and would not let go is how easy it is to spot the sin in others, but to overlook the power of sin in our own lives. Now, before you switch channels and tune me out, stay with me a bit longer.

I do not believe that the chief identifying characteristic of human beings is that we are miserable sinners who can do nothing right. First and foremost we are children of God created in God's image. However, we deceive ourselves – and pave the path to calamity – if we are blissfully naïve to the fact that we have a proclivity to screwing up.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is anything but subtle. He is at his hyperbolic best in warning people not to lead others astray. "If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

Knowing that his disciples were not exactly candidates for a Rhodes scholarship, Jesus belts out another frightening image. "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... And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you..." well, you heard the passage and you get the picture.

Recently, Camilla and I visited several grand churches in Italy and more than one of them had a towering mural that depicted in graphic detail the suffering of those who had been cast into hell. Fueled by "Inferno," the first part of Dante's epic poem, *Divine Comedy*, the artists created scenes of demons torturing people in ways that corresponded with their earthly sins. Taken literally, these paintings present significant intellectual problems for post-Enlightenment Christians. However, I must admit the scenes left you with indelible images warning you to avoid sinful behavior. For instance, the person whose chief sin was greed was choking on a mouthful of money. The person whose sin was lust... well, I'll leave that to your imagination. Let's just say it would make you squirm!

Many theologians reject the notion of an eternal realm where demons execute grim punishments on people for their sins. For one, hell would be over-flowing with people and heaven would be empty. And, second, the Scriptures declare that God *loves* the whole world and seeks to restore everyone to a right relationship. As one theologian says, "Instead of condemning us to hell, God will love the hell out of us."² Yet, whether or not you believe in hell as a literal place in the afterlife, all of us certainly do things that create hell on earth when we alienate ourselves from God and rupture our relationships with one another.

We live in a time when it is fashionable to downplay our sinful nature. Pop psychology names guilt as enemy number one in the struggle to be a healthy and well-adjusted person. However, do we not set ourselves up for a fall by ignoring our faults? How can we become the person God wants us to become if we do not try to conquer our shortcomings?

Most of us have a strong tendency to grade ourselves on a curve. There are people who do terrible things – terrorists, drug dealers, habitual liars, CEOs that slash jobs to give themselves raises, pedophile priests, racist cops, crooked politicians – pick your pet peeve. Compared to scoundrels, we are exceptionally virtuous. The problem is that we want to set the behavior bar so low that we can easily clear it.

If you dig through the thousands of verses of Scripture, you can turn up some rogue verses to support some truly awful actions. However, no one has yet discovered a verse tucked away among some of the strange lines in Leviticus or in the obscure books of Obadiah or Malachi to support the notion that God grades on a curve.

God does not set the bar low, but rather staggeringly high. The standard is Jesus, and when compared to him, we realize we fall pitifully short. But, what at first sounds like bad news is really good news because it humbles us, and helps us to see ourselves in a true light.

Most of us have honed our skills at deceiving ourselves by denying or rationalizing our penchant to sin. However, we cannot work on overcoming a problem until we name it and recognize the fact that it is: (1) slowly corrupting us, (2) preventing us from building loving relationships, and (3) deceiving us into thinking that we really can be self-sufficient and do not need God and God's standards.

Isn't that why a person can convince himself that an adulterous relationship is no great harm? It is not until his marriage crumbles that he recognizes the seductive lure of the lust within and how it convinced him to traipse down a dangerous path until it was too late.

Isn't that why a person can convince herself that embezzling funds from the company will not hurt anyone? It is not until she is being sentenced that she recognizes that it was the greed within her that twisted her thinking into rationalizing criminal behavior.

Isn't that why a parent overreacts and lashes out at her child for disobeying or doing something dumb? As she is trying to repair the damage she inflicted, she realizes that her internal anger was spinning out of her control until she was unable to stop herself.

Isn't that why a person buys a house and a car he cannot afford? It is not until he files for bankruptcy that he realizes his envy of others blinded him to reasonable limits of spending.

Today's passage screams at people living in the 21st Century: "Do not be so naïve about sin. It lurks within everyone and you ignore it at your own peril."

In his book, *The Road to Character*, David Brooks talks about the civil rights activists of the sixties who led the struggle against segregation and racist laws. One group thought that if you simply educated people and raised their consciousness, people would recognize that segregation was wrong and they would reverse unjust laws.

A second group, which included Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was grounded in the tradition of the biblical prophets. They knew that being right did not necessarily lead to victory. They knew that human beings are prone to sin and most will rationalize injustices if they benefit from the current system. "One consequence of this attitude was that they took it as a matter of course that given (humankind's tendency to sin) people could not be (transformed) merely by education, consciousness raising, and expanded opportunity. (The theory of nonviolent confrontation) allowed them to expose the villainy of their foes and to make their enemies sins work against them as they resorted to ever more brutality."³

The battle for civil rights did not pit demons of darkness against angels of light. Brooks notes that "in their best moments, the civil rights activists were aware that they were in danger of being corrupted by their own aggressive actions. In their best moments, they understood that they could become guilty of self-righteousness...they could become more increasingly vain as their audiences enlarged; their hearts could harden as the conflict grew more dire and their hatred for their enemies deepened; they could be compelled to make morally tainted choices as they drew closer to power; and the more they altered history, the more they could be infected by pride."⁴

Not pride in the sense of feeling good about oneself, but the pride that deceives oneself into thinking “I am so clever and strong and good that I can be self-sufficient. I do not need others and I do not need God.”

Our motives are never as pure as we like to imagine, and it is easy to rationalize that what is good for me is what is right for all. But if we recognize that we are prone to acting in our own self-interest and are often blind to our own faults, then we stand the possibility of overcoming our weaknesses and acting virtuously.

In today’s passage, Jesus uses wildly exaggerated images to drive home his point that how we live truly matters. If we give in to temptation, it not only can lead to disaster in our own lives, but can also cause others to stumble. However, if we follow the path that Christ has shown us is right and true and good, we can draw closer to the abundant life God wants us to experience and we can become a blessing – not a block – to others.

NOTES

1. David Galloway, “Getting Serious,” *Day1.org*, October 01, 2006.
2. John Cobb
3. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, (New York: Random House, 2015), p.147.
4. *Ibid.*, p.148.

Prayers of the People ~ Susan Moseley

We rise this day O Holy One, embracing the gift of this fellowship, these friendships and especially your grace poured out among us.

Thank you for the miracles that allow us to see one another, speak with one another, and embrace one another. And thank you for leaving a portion of our lives incomplete and unfinished, allowing us to create new songs to sing, discover new faces to call friends, and to seek new avenues to serve you. Thank you for your ferociously faithful Spirit, by which we seek to do impossible things...to love our enemies, to give sacrificially, to forgive generously, to confront our prejudices, which dwell deep within us...the ones which provoke us to dismiss or exploit people, races, nations different from us.

O Lord Hear Our Prayer...

O divine healer we pray for the restoration of peace in the world and for our reconciliation with the land, the air, and the oceans which ensure life and livelihood for the whole human family.

We pray for peace in every home and every heart...that brothers and sisters would encourage one another; that spouses and partners would forgive one another; that classmates and workmates would help one another, so that we would be known as disciples of compassion.

God of pilgrims and refugees, we pray for people who are separated from their families, friends or communities of faith. Let them know they are loved by the people they remember and may the new people they meet become families to them.

O Lord Hear Our Prayer...

Lord, be in our every action as we cook and clean, as we shuttle to and from shopping and school; keep us mindful that every moment whether remarkable or routine, joyful or sorrowful, provides opportunity for our spirits to grow in grace and gratitude.

Lord be in our resting, our sleeping, our day dreams and meditations, reminding us that you often come to us in more silent times – in more silent ways – in the remembrance of a loved one, as a ray of hope in darker situations, as a still, small voice in the midst of storminess.

May our church prosper above all else in faithfulness to you and so that we may find our purposes fixed in service to others and in obedience to your will.

O Lord Hear Our Prayer...

We continue our prayer with the words Jesus taught us saying...Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.