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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
19th Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 21/Year B
September 30, 2018
Text: Mark 9:38-50

Stumbling Blocks

Stumbling blocks. Millstones. Amputated limbs. Disembodied eyeballs. Worms. Fire. It didn't take long at this past Thursday's bible study for someone to say aloud the thoughts of practically everyone around the table: "I don't like this Gospel."

This morning Mark presents to us more of the unfolding story of Jesus laying out for his disciples what he expects of those who want to follow him. This passage is clearly a difficult read as the meek and mild Jesus of countless bible classes minces no words. What happened to those comforting words we have all come to know and love such as, "*Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Mt. 11:28)?*"

If you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones, it would be better if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea, he says. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off," he says. "If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off," he says. "If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; he says. Self-amputate or risk going into hell, *where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*"

Understand, we are not to take his words literally. But in a very real and urgent way Jesus has gotten our attention. We are not really being asked to surrender body parts. Otherwise, many of us would be in a truly sorry state.

So what has happened to bring the disciples and us to this point in today's gospel?

By this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is traveling toward the city of Jerusalem alone with his disciples and he is teaching them what it means to follow him and what he expects of anyone who calls themselves one of his followers. He is also speaking to them about his upcoming death. And it seems that for all of his talking, all of his teaching, the disciples were not getting it. And just recently, Jesus had admonished them for arguing about who among them was the greatest. He tells them that if anyone considers himself the greatest that that one must be

willing to be the servant of all. He then took a child into his arms and told them that anyone who followed him must welcome the least of society for in doing so they welcome him. But then out of nowhere John pipes up, “We saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him. He wasn’t one of us.” Really John?

Maybe John thought this might be the way to change the subject. We don’t know. But Jesus didn’t respond with a ‘thank you.’ This was not the time to be distracted for Jesus knew that time was running short and soon all their lives would be turned upside down. Instead, he says to John and to all of them with impatience and urgency in his voice, ‘Pay attention!’ *“Don’t stop him. “No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. If he’s not an enemy he’s an ally. Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side (Peterson)”*. God sees what he’s done and it is a good thing! But YOU, listen up! I need you to understand that discipleship is not and will not be a walk in the park for you or anyone else. There are enough other distractions. Do not be a stumbling block to him or anyone else doing good in my name because if you do, you will only keep people from following me! Don’t be that stumbling block. Don’t be that kind of deterrent to yourself or to your neighbor! Let it go. *“Whoever is not against us is for us.”*

In her multi-award winning play, “A Raisin in the Sun,” Lorraine Hansberry tells the story of the Younger family. Led by the family’s matriarch, Lena, this African American family living in a small, well lived in apartment on Chicago’s Southside, dreams of making a better life for themselves. Each of them has a goal. With no plans for retirement, Mama Lena still does domestic work and has hopes of buying a ‘real’ house with a garden for her family. She has two living children. The younger of the two is her daughter, Beneatha, who is a college student struggling to find her identity as she is on the cusp of adulthood. Beneatha dreams of becoming a doctor. Lena’s eldest is Walter Lee, a man not satisfied with his life as a chauffeur. He wants to give his wife, Ruth, some of the finer things which they cannot afford on his and Ruth’s salary as domestic worker. And he wants the best for his ten year old son, Travis, who with his friends, entertain themselves by playing ball and chasing rats in the alley way. The thin line between things staying as they are and hopes and dreams being realized is a \$10,000 check they will soon receive from a life insurance policy as Mr. Younger, Sr. worked himself to his death providing for his family. Yes, ten thousand dollars in the 1950’s was a lot of money, enough to change all their lives.

Walter Lee, who is in his mid-thirties, is more than a little anxious about Lena's check because he has visions of having what he sees other men, white men, his age and younger possessing. To accomplish this he wants to go into buying a liquor store with two 'friends.' The time is now or never. But Lena/Mama, a faith-filled and God-fearing woman, tells Ruth, whom Walter has baited to speak on his behalf, that she will not allow her son to buy into a liquor store with the money she will receive in Big Walter's name. And the conversation follows like this.

Ruth says to Mama: "...I don't know what it is-but he *needs* something-something I can't give him any more. He needs this chance, Lena.

Mama: But liquor honey...

Ruth: Well-like Walter say-I 'spec' people going to always be drinking themselves some liquor.

Mama: Well-whether they drinks it or not ain't none of my business. But whether I sells it to 'em is-and I don't want *that* on my ledger this late in life.

And like that, the conversation about the liquor store is over and done. Lena is not about to have a liquor store as her stumbling stone.

Jesus never says who or what our stumbling stones in life might look like. As theologian, Karoline Lewis, writes, "Of course, Jesus doesn't really articulate where and how and why we stumble. He simply tells us that we will, and that we have the potential cause others to as well. What is so appealing about securing the fall of another? This is a question for the human condition, one that probes the truth of our human brokenness. It's a question that everyone who claims faith in Jesus needs to answer."*

Perhaps at the heart of this passage Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us-look at the stumbling blocks you place in front of others. Those blocks might be the way in which we exclude others, the way we size our neighbor up leaving them to feel less than, the walls we build, our disregard of another because of who they are and what they believe. Leading others to do things that do not build up but rather tear down relationships, things that cause the better parts of our humanity to take a back seat. And what about those blocks we put in front of ourselves? Not the shoes we leave in the middle of the hallway but our obsession with "stuff". Addictions. Resentment. Snobbery. Self-righteousness. Judgement. Pointing fingers. Perfection. We sometimes sabotage our own happiness and peace. We like a convenient discipleship. We may even ask ourselves as a community of

faith is there anything that keeps us from doing God's work in this community and in the communities in which we live? What might our stumbling blocks be?

Jesus is dead serious about the expected behavior of anyone who calls himself or herself a follower of his. What we do and say and what we do not do and do not say matters greatly for us as Christians.

If you cause anyone to stumble and fall-tie a stone around your neck. Cut off your hand, foot, a body part; poke your eye out. "It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one foot, one hand, one eye than to be thrown into hell..." In other words, come into the kingdom mutilated rather than be absent from God for all eternity! Now that would be hell!

I don't think Jesus is out and out condemning us or setting us up for failure but he is giving us great cause to think. To think about how we go about our daily lives and doing right by others.

Jesus knows that the road and the way of the cross is hard. But he bids us to keep our eyes fixed on him. To follow him. We will fall down. But we do get up. By God's grace we will get up and try for another day.

Amen.

*"Living by the Word", by Karoline M. Lewis in *Christian Century*,
September 16, 2015