

Mark 9:38-50 ³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹But 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. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹Truly 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. ⁴²“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. ⁴³If 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. ⁴⁵And 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. ⁴⁷And 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, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. ⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt 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

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“Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones”

Rev. Amy Terhune

When I used to serve in Columbiaville, we had a town festival every July, and the Assembly of God Church and the United Methodist Church used to do a community worship service that weekend in the park. There were actually three churches in town, but the third church wouldn't participate as long as a woman pastor was involved. (Grrr!) Even so, at that festival, we would lift a prayer asking God to bless the ministry of each church in town. My congregation seemed to think it was kind of nice thing, so I began to incorporate prayers for the other churches into my pastoral prayer on fairly regular basis for a while after that. I stopped when I received a visit from the pastor of that third church in town, who has heard that I prayed for the other churches in town, and informed me in no uncertain terms that just because I was serving the biggest church in town didn't give me the right to be paternalistic and condescending, that they were doing just fine and didn't need my prayers, thank you very much. I remember being flabbergasted in the moment, but I did stop, because obviously something was getting around town and it wasn't what I intended. Yet I'll admit: I resented his attitude. The wall between grew thicker that day, and there wasn't much I could do about it. The sad fact was: we were competitors, not colleague. Unfortunately, it happens more often than we admit. I would like to pretend I don't understand how he could be so upset, but every time Adam Hamilton over at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection puts out another book, I hear grumbling from some of my colleagues about how he's gotten too big for his britches and how he doesn't get reappointed from time to time like the rest of us.

I don't know that it's consolation, exactly, but the problem isn't a new one. Two thousand years ago, John came to Jesus to inform him about a clear case of copyright infringement. “He was casting out demons in your name. He was preaching your stuff! So we told him to stop.” These are the same disciples who, about a dozen verses or so back, were trying to cast a demon out of a boy and couldn't do it. So maybe they are a little jealous. Or maybe they just want to make it clear who the inner circle is. But whatever the case, they expect Jesus to tell them: “Well done, good, thanks for protecting my back there!” Instead, they're reminded that everyone has a job to do for the Kingdom, be it casting out demons or fetching water.

And then Jesus offers some pretty harsh teaching. And these words aren't directed to the exorcist or the water-bearer or them over there. These words are directed at the faithful disciples, the ones following him all over the countryside. They're meant for us. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; better to enter heaven maimed than go to hell whole. Yeesh! We think to ourselves, "He can't really mean that, can he?" Well, yes and no. Jesus is not advocating amputation. We can't take it literally. It's hyperbole, meant to make a point. But while we can't take it literally, we must take it seriously. From the very first century, the church has understood this passage as a metaphor of extremes used by Jesus to drive home the severity of sin—especially sin that might lead others into sin or to fall away from the faith.

Now, I know we all just love it when I preach about sin. It's everybody's favorite topic. But you know what? I don't imagine that Jesus *enjoyed* talking about sin any more than we do. I don't think he sat around and clapped his hands with glee and said 'oh goody! I get to talk about sin today! Let's really scare the bajeebers out of 'em!" No! But he did enjoy seeing people connect with God. And he knew what gets in the way of that connection. It's called sin.

We often say that Jesus came to save humanity. Not so. Jesus came to save sinners. Because all of humanity is caught in the snare of sin, we can say that Jesus came to save humanity. But the reason he came was not because we're human, but because we're sinners. Jesus loves sinners. Prostitutes and tax collectors were welcome at the table, a thief beside him on the cross was promised salvation, gentiles from neighboring lands found healing and acceptance. And still today, Jesus loves sinners—the closet-drunk, the adulterer, the porn-addict, and the junkie, not to mention, the arrogant, the greedy, the self-righteous, the gossip, the jealous, the resentful, and the apathetic. And despite the harshness of his words, his teaching is actually very pragmatic.

First, if something is causing you to sin, cut it out. If something is a problem in your life—if something is pulling you away from God—deal with it. Don't pretend it isn't there. And don't feed it.

King Duncan tells about "...a coast guard vessel was cruising the Canadian Arctic in 1939 when the men spotted a polar bear stranded on an ice floe. It was quite a novelty for the seamen, who threw the bear salami, peanut butter, and chocolate bars. Then they ran out of the food. Unfortunately, the polar bear hadn't run out of appetite, so he proceeded to board their vessel. The men on ship were terrified and opened the fire hoses on the bear. The polar bear loved it and raised his paws in the air to get the water under his armpits. We don't know how they did it, but eventually they forced the polar bear to return to his ice pad—but not before teaching these seamen a horrifying lesson about feeding polar bears.

Some people make the same mistake with sin that these sailors nearly made with the polar bear. They begin feeding it—a little at a time without thinking through the consequences. "It says something about our times," writes Willard D. Ferrell, "that we rarely use the word SINFUL except to describe a really good dessert." [2 ¶s from King Duncan, *Collected Sermons*, www.Sermons.com.]

Instead, I reminded of "...a cute little story in an Illinois newspaper several years back about a little boy named Jeffrey who found himself confronted with a vicious dog while delivering papers on his newspaper route. Fortunately, he did not suffer serious bites. In fact, his flesh was hardly touched. His pants bore the brunt of the offense. The little boy told a news reporter that the reason he was unharmed is because he heard Jesus talking to him.

"Oh?" said the reporter, "What did Jesus say to you?"

And the little boy answered, "He said, Run, Jeffrey, Run! So I did." Good advice Jesus gave. The rest of us should take it as well. [3 ¶s from William H. Hinson, *Reshaping The Inner You*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), as used in "Waiting For The Angels" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Second, "...we had better be prepared to sacrifice our whole selves to the task of the mission... Jesus doesn't paint a rosy portrait of genuine discipleship. Following the way of true service may

require significant sacrifices on the part of would-be followers. Do whatever it takes, Jesus cautions in today's text, to keep yourself and your actions from being roadblocks instead of street signs along the path of faith. Jesus' suggestions are meant to shock us. In order to be a genuine disciple he warns, we must be willing to sacrifice and suffer in order to help another." [adapted from "Salted with Fire" by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

There was a simple story in the sports pages a few years back that demonstrates what I mean by this. You can also watch it on You Tube (at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttkBP2XDZvE>). It's a story about the first home run that Sara Tucholsky of Western Oregon University ever hit. With two runners on base and a strike against her, Sara did something she had never done before. She hit a home run. But then as she started to run around the bases, she missed first base. Realizing what she had done, she started back to tag it and that's when something terrible happened. In turning so quickly, Sara tore her ACL and collapsed in terrible pain. She crawled back to first base but couldn't go on. She would be called out if her teammates tried to help her. The umpire said a pinch runner could be called in, but the homer would count as a single.

Then, the members of the opposing Central Washington University softball team did something that stunned spectators. Central Washington first baseman Mallory Holtman asked the umpire if she and her teammates could help Sara. The umpire said there was no rule against it. So Holtman and shortstop Liz Wallace put their arms under Sara's legs, and she put her arms over their shoulders. The three players headed around the bases, stopping to let Sara touch each base with her good leg. The three-run homer would count. Here's what's amazing: this act of sportsmanship by the Central Washington team contributed to their own elimination from the playoffs. They wound up losing the game by 2 runs. There was a price to their compassion, but still they did what was right. Sports writers around the country have hailed this event as the ultimate act of sportsmanship. [2 ¶s from Billy Strayhorn, <http://www.epulpit.net/080810.htm>; as used in "Can't We All Just Get Along?" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] All I know is that regardless of the score, everybody left that field a winner that day.

In the newsletter this week, I printed a poem by Roy L. Sharpe entitled "A Bag of Tools". It goes like this:

Isn't it strange that princes and kings,
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
And common people like you and me
Are builders for eternity?
Each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass, a book of rules;
And each must make – ere life has flown –
A stumbling block or a stepping stone.

Which are building with your life? If something is causing you to sin, cut it out. That's hard. True discipleship will demand sacrifices. That's hard. Hard, these days, gets a bad rap. But lots of things are hard. Training to be an Olympic athlete is hard. Practicing an instrument to be a good musician is hard. Maintain a GPA high enough to get where you want in life is hard. Writing and delivering a stand-up comedy routine is hard. Working our way up the ladder at work is hard. Coping with our losses as we age is hard. Carving stepping stones for others who come behind us is hard. But often times, things that are hard are also meaningful and worthwhile. So here's one final thought on today's text: Leonard Sweet notes that, "Jesus does not end our lesson on a dismal note. Instead, he makes a promise to all would-be disciples, to all who are willing to struggle against selfishness and offer themselves up for service in Christ's name. At the end of today's lesson, Jesus proclaims that everyone will be salted with fire (verse 49). Those who commit themselves to Jesus, those who bear the name of Christ, are promised that both the staying power of salt and the surviving power of fire... If you've been

salted with fire, there's a sharpness and freshness to your faith. If you've been salted with fire, no deluge can extinguish the warmth and power of God's presence in your life." [adapted from "Salted with Fire" by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

In others, if we take up the hard work of following Christ, of putting others first, of disciplining ourselves in holiness, we find a blessing in the hardness—power, perseverance, presence.

"The chaplain of a state prison received a request from a father of a young man who was interned at the prison. The young man had committed a robbery and had been sentenced for many years in jail. He was angry, embittered. The boy's father came each week to visit him, but the boy steadfastly refused to see him. The chaplain was asked to intervene, to plead with the boy to see his father, but the young prisoner refused.

"Despite his refusal, the boy's father took off work every week, boarded a bus, and traveled across the state in the hope of seeing his son. Every week. It became the young minister's difficult task each week to ask the son, "Do you want to see your dad?" Then he had to bear word of the refusal to the waiting father. The father would thank the chaplain, gather his belongings, and head toward the door for the bus trip back home.

"One day after telling the father that once again his son would not meet with him, the chaplain said, "Look, I know he's your son, but this isn't good for you. Your son is an embittered, defiant young man. Go home and get on with your life. No one would do what you're doing, to just keep on facing the pain and the rejection week after week after week. Nobody would put up this."

"The older man looked the younger one straight in the eye. Then he said, "God has put up with it for centuries." He picked up his meager belongings and headed out the door. [4 ¶s from "How Far Can I Go," Dr. Martha Campbell; as used in "Choices" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

He's right. If something is leading you to sin, cut it out. If something is calling you to the hard work of discipleship and following Jesus, take it on. And in all things, know that you are loved beyond measure by one who never give up on you, never stop challenging you to what's next, and never forsake you or abandon you. Instead, the master build works in us to turn even those parts of my stepping stones that sometimes look a little too "stumbling-blocky" into pathways where I and others may know him better. Someone has said that the difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how we use the materials in our path. But I can't imagine a greater blessing than that a stepping stone I laid may be a tool God uses to help another. May it be so. Amen.