

“Stumbling Block or Stepping Stone”

Matthew 16:21-28, Proper 17-A

August 31, 2014

Well it is official! Another new school year has now opened among us here in the state of South Carolina. So let me ask you: Do you have any idea just how many students there are currently enrolled in our public schools in the Palmetto State—kindergarten through the 12th grade? As of last Friday (August 29), we now have 699,198 students enrolled in some 1,177 public schools!

You know, brothers and sisters, for many of these young people the beginning of a new school year is **a very exciting time**—filled with all sorts of **hopes and possibilities**; the hope and possibility of strengthening old friendships as well as the hope and the possibility of forging new ones. But for some young people the beginning of a new school year may be a **horrifying thing to even think about, especially for those who have become the past victims of some type of school bullying.**

Today, however, that whole matter of **bullying can “go viral”** (be posted on the Internet) **in a matter of minutes**, which is probably both **a bad thing and a good thing**. Years ago if a young man made a terrible mistake on the athletic field, it’s possible that his friends teased him about it and he might even have become the subject of a few cruel jokes being told in the school cafeteria at lunchtime. But soon after that it was all forgotten. Today that scene may be captured on film and broadcast to the world in a matter of minutes, invoking public ridicule and shame, because so many students these days come to school with a **“smart” phone that also is accessorized with a camera and a camcorder**. On the other hand, having these electronic devices at their disposal might also help some students **capture one student mercilessly harassing another, therefore providing school officials with the evidence needed for the proper administration of justice!**

Brothers and sisters, St. Matthew did not have a smart phone or a camcorder, but if he did I think he might captured this rather embarrassing episode in the life of Simon Peter on film too, and quite possibility turned it into a YouTube classic, because there are some very important lessons for us all to be learned from what takes place here.

Let’s remember that all of this falls directly on the heels of that most wonderful experience for Simon Peter and the other 11 disciples. The place is **Caesarea Philippi** and Jesus has just asked his disciples pointblank: **“Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15)**. Peter, so often the spokesperson for the group, speaks up and answers emphatically: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” (Matthew 16:16)**.

I. FIRST, JESUS PREDICTS HIS FUTURE SUFFERING, DEATH AND RESURRECTION

It was soon after this that Jesus then begins to speak to his disciples about his impending passion for the very first time! We read in our Gospel lesson: **“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised!” (v. 21)**

This is when Peter takes our Lord Jesus aside and rebukes him saying, **“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (v. 23)**

But Jesus wasn't pleased with Peter's response! This is when he then turned towards Peter and said, ***"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man!" (Matthew 16:23)***

The Greek word that is translated as "hindrance" here in the **ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION (ESV)** is *scandalon* from which we derive the English word "scandal" even though the word itself most literally means a "stumbling block!" ***"Get behind me, Satan, you are a stumbling block to me! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man!" (Matthew 16:23)***

Friends, this **whole matter of something or someone becoming a stumbling block in the life of another person, is anything or anyone who could greatly interfere with the kind of personal relationship that God longs to establish between himself and another person or between himself and a group of persons; a word that actually appears repeatedly in the Bible in 14 different verses.**

Friends, do you think that Jesus' disciples understood what he was talking about when he began to predict to them very clearly now his own impending death and resurrection?

In one sense they didn't understand it at all, because when Jesus was arrested and killed, his death was a shock to them and many of them scattered immediately each to his own home, like the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13-35). Not a one of them understood the necessity for his death, to make atonement for their sins and ours, or anticipated his resurrection, as the proof positive that God not only accepted the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf, but that he proved to us once and for all that there is life after death for all who believe in him.

On the other hand, the disciples of Jesus understood his words here all too well—especially Simon Peter! Otherwise, why would Peter have tried to dissuade Jesus from even thinking such a horrible thing? --- Someone has said to never say never! But here Peter is saying "never" to God! "Never Lord" Peter said! *"This shall never happen to you!" (v. 22)*

The trouble for Peter and all the disciples is that the whole concept of suffering certainly did not fit into their understanding of what the Christ, or the long-awaited Messiah, should do!

Peter may have been thinking along these lines: "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you because God sent you into this world to restore our nation, the nation of Israel to its former glory under King David! We've got this all planned and all figured out for you, Jesus! We've seen you feed over 5000 people with five little barley loaves of bread and two fish! We've seen you walk on water! We've seen you heal the sick from all sorts of diseases! These are all grand gestures for sure! But when you go marching into Jerusalem, we are hoping that you are going to rain down fire and brimstone upon the occupying forces of the Roman Empire, and that you will put on display a real Sodom and Gomorrah reenactment!"

But Jesus wasn't kidding! And for just having praised Peter a few moments ago in saying, ***"Blessed are you Simon, son of John!" (Matthew 16:17)***, now Jesus rebukes Peter also, by saying, ***"Get behind me Satan for you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man!"***

Many commentators will point out the fact that many of us who have become very familiar with this story, have probably turned to another person, a time or two in our own lives and said to them, "Get behind me, Satan!" Sometimes we might say this in a **very dubious fashion**, and at other times we might say this under a **set of far more serious circumstances!**

Let's say that you have been **invited to become a guest at someone's home for a lovely dinner party and because you are on a rather strict diet, you are grateful** that the hostess has prepared a **rather healthy meal**. You eat one-half of a baked chicken breast, some steamed broccoli and some tossed salad, though you purposefully leave off the dressing, not even adding any salt or pepper to your salad, either, heaven forbid! But then when coffee is served after the meal, the hostess comes to everyone at the table and sets a nice big piece of **lemon margarine pie in front of everyone, you included!**

Now because you know the hostess very well, for after **all she is your own biological sister**, you look at her and say, "**Get behind me Satan!**"

But maybe there have been other times in your life when the stumbling blocks, or temptations, that others have tried to send in your direction were of a far more serious nature. Maybe you were being asked to look the other way when there was **some kind of ethical violation being suggested by a coworker**, or maybe you were asked to participate in some other **type of compromising situation** of a far more personal nature.

But by the grace of God, for all practical purposes, you responded in much the same way that the young man Joseph responded to Potiphar's wife when she tried to seduce him, because she found him all too easy on her eyes and her husband was out of town! Do you remember what Joseph said to her in response to her advancements? In **Genesis 39:9** we read, "**Joseph said, 'No one is greater in this house than I am. My master (that is, your husband) has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife! How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against my God!'**"

Joseph rightly understood that sins that we commit against other people are always also sins that we commit against God. **Of course, Joseph never heard these words that Peter speaks to Jesus** in our Gospel lesson today, but if he had, he would have been perfectly justified in saying to Potiphar's wife upon that particular occasion: "**Get behind me, Satan, for you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man!**" (**Matthew 16:23**).

Friends, Christianity without a cross is worthless. Without the cross there is no salvation because there is no Savior. Christ's example helps no one, both because we cannot follow it and also because it is not an example we need but a Savior.

II. SECONDLY, JESUS CHALLENGES HIS DISCIPLES TO TAKE UP THEIR CROSS TO FOLLOW HIM.

Next Jesus goes on to share with his disciples a powerful paradox and a paradox is a statement that appears to be **self-contradictory, when it isn't at all:** "**If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?**"

So the question I found myself confronted with this past week was very personal: “How about me? Am I a stumbling block for Jesus in other peoples’ lives? Or am I a stepping stone for Jesus in other peoples’ lives?” For me to be a stumbling block would be for me to become **like a giant stone that may cause someone else to fall, to trip, and to come crashing down in a very hard fashion to the ground!** A stepping stone, on the other hand, is used to move a person from one spot to another. It is something that generally takes us over an otherwise harsh terrain.

In Florida I grew up with St. Augustine grass that surely makes for a beautiful lawn, but certainly back in those days of my childhood, long before there any of those weed-and-feed products on the market, there were these very prickly things that sometimes were hidden in our lawn, we called **“sandspurs.”** Step on one of those sandspurs with your bare feet and ooh! That was smart’s!”

Far more than just being there just for aesthetic purposes, stepping-stones were very functional too and turned a rather terrain into a pathway that was far more safe and navigable!

Many people today, of course, are looking for a totally pain-free existence in this world, yet while it is true that no one likes to suffer, **living totally for self and living selfishly in this world can leave a person feeling completely empty and worthless.** Jesus lived sacrificially for others, and Jesus teaches us that as we are willing to live sacrificially towards others too—our lives will take on a much deeper meaning. The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, ***“Who for the JOY that was set before him he endured the cross, despised the shame and is now seated at the right hand of God!” (Hebrews 12:2)***

The **Prophet Jeremiah** certainly was having a hard time of it when we meet him in our Old Testament lesson this morning. He **bares his troubled soul to God for sure.** He had tried so hard to be faithful to the LORD God in his calling as a prophet, but **he was met with nothing but resistance** from those to whom he was called to minister. He is so angry about the whole situation that ends up saying some very disrespectful things to the LORD God too. Jeremiah says to the LORD: ***“Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?”***

But God comes and ministers to Jeremiah in a very personal way. The LORD God says to Jeremiah: ***“If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless!”*** (Jeremiah 15:19-21)

When I was a child, I can remember walking with other friends just a few blocks from the neighborhood where we lived to a nearby park and playground. One of the most interesting pieces of equipment to play—in addition on to the swings, monkey bars, and merry-go-round was the **“see-saw,”** as we called it. Up north they call it a **teeter-totter.** Involving two children, one child would sit on each end of the board and bounce each other up and down. Sometimes the one who was down would stay there and leave his friend stuck up in the air yelling to be let down. But the cruelest of all tricks was getting off the see-saw and running away when our friend was up in the air—so that he, or she—could come crashing down to the ground with a painful bump!

Sometimes, we may feel that Jesus does that to us. We trust him to be there with us through the ups and down of life. However, when life takes a turn and leaves us with bumps and bruises, it may feel as if he has walked away leaving our lives to come painfully crashing down. But in another book ascribed to Jeremiah, the book of Lamentations, listen to what we read there in chapter 3: ***“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases. Her mercies never come to an end” (v. 22)*** and the same God who says this to Jeremiah, is also faithful to you and me, even when everything seems to be falling apart. This means that in the midst of our pain, even though we may be lonely, we are not alone. And though we may not feel his presence, he is there as our trusted companion who will never walk away and let us down!

There are two major bodies of water in the land where Jesus walked. One is the Sea of Galilee, a beautiful lake 13 miles long and 7 miles wide filled with fish and surrounded by lush foliage. The other body of water is the Dead Sea, 50 miles long and 11 miles wide, the shoreline of which is 1300 feet below sea level. Seven million tons of water evaporates from the Dead Sea every day. The saline or salt content of the water of the Dead Sea ranges from 26-35%, making it 10 times saltier than the oceans of the world. There’s no seaweed or plants of any kind in or around the water. There are no fish or any kind of swimming, squirming creatures living in or near the water. As a matter of fact, what you’ll see on the shores of the Sea is white, crystals of salt covering EVERYTHING. According to **EXTREMESCIENCE.COM**, fish accidentally swimming into the waters from one of the several freshwater streams that feed the Sea are killed instantly, their bodies quickly coated with a preserving layer of salt crystals and then tossed onto shore by the wind and waves.

Both the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are fed by the Jordan River There is really only one difference between these two bodies of water, really only one thing that causes the Sea of Galilee to be beautiful and alive while the Dead Sea is barren and lifeless. The Sea of Galilee has an outlet; the Dead Sea does not! Water flows through the Sea of Galilee. Water flows into the Dead Sea but not out! Spiritual input but no spiritual output = stagnation.

If you and I have spiritual input but no spiritual output, we will become stagnant, lifeless, bitter, and caustic. Rather let us say to the Almighty One again this morning: “Drawn to the cross which you have blessed, with healing balm for souls distressed, to find in you my life, my rest, Christ crucified, I come. How well you know my grief and fears, your grace abused, my misspent years! Yet now to you with contrite tears, Christ crucified, I come. Wash me and take away each stain. Let nothing of my sin remain. For cleansing, though it be through pain, Christ crucified, I come. Then all that you would have me do, shall such glad service be for you, that angels wish to do it too. Christ crucified, I come.” (LW 356) Amen

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