

Stumbling Blocks – For Ourselves and Others

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Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50

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In the New Testament text that Barbara just read for us, Jesus lays out a process of what can sound like massive self-amputation as a means towards spiritual growth. We might be inclined to dismiss this as crazy talk. But before we do, we may observe the similarities between Jesus' process of noticing the things in us that are causing us to stumble, or even worse, that are causing others to stumble, and the self-examination we find in the 12-step movement. The 12-step recovery movement has been an absolute life-saver to untold numbers of alcoholics, family members of alcoholics, and people in the throes of all kinds of addiction. The development of the 12-step movement is one of the miracles of the 20th century, and one of the most beautiful things about Lewinsville Presbyterian Church is the way that this congregation has been willing to be home to a variety of 12-step groups over the years. At the heart of the 12 steps, in steps 4-9, is the summons to a searching and fearless moral inventory of oneself. As one engages in this ruthless process of self-examination, one then admits to God, oneself, and at least one other person the exact nature of one's wrongs; becomes entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character; asks God to do that work of removal and extraction; and begins to make amends for the harm one has done because of one's unconscious, addictive mentality, except when making those amends would actually cause greater harm.

The recovery process is not only about stopping drinking, though that is itself the central and driving fruit of the process. Recovery is a spiritual process in which we partner with God in weeding out our shortcomings, our fears, and the roots of sin that have planted themselves deep inside of us.

This is very, very much like the kind of self-examination to which Jesus invites his followers in Mark 9. "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. It is better for you to live in God's joyful kingdom with a bad limp, only one hand, and an eyepatch than for you to be overloaded with fear, greed, hatred, and all of the cruelty that your eyes, hands and feet can get you into." You can tell Jesus wants to get his listeners' attention, because he turns up the heat in his rhetoric. "Better to enter life maimed than to have two good hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire."

A preacher friend of mine says that his congregation loves it when he gets on them about their sin. "Hit us hard, preacher," some in his congregation will say to him. "Don't go soft on us." Some people seem to feel there is almost something redemptive about being yelled at. (Though I have heard female colleagues say that when they

preach confrontational sermons, people just accuse them of being shrill and angry, so there may be a double standard operating here for male and female preachers.) What my friend has said, however, is that, though some in his congregation seem to like it when he preaches aggressively, the yelling alone does not lead people to change their behavior. They just seem to enjoy being yelled at, rather like a coach who yells at his team at halftime.

Some people may feel like Jesus is doing his own version of yelling at the disciples here in Mark 9. What Jesus is doing here, though, is summoning his followers to a life of rigorous self-examination – to engage in “a searching and fearless moral inventory” – to discover the parts of our lives where we are causing harm to the world and to other people. His language about ‘unquenchable fire’ is intended to wake us out of our complacency and realize the urgency of this work.

This past week, several of us on the staff were participating in a Dismantling Racism Cohort that is offered by our presbytery. In the course of the workshop, we spent some time in small groups, discussing the material and our responses to it. In one particular small group, I was in a group with two Black colleagues, and we were discussing the topic of microaggressions that white people can act out in our interactions with Black people and other people of color. For example, we may tell an African American person that they are “very articulate,” as though that is some kind of a shock. Or we may clutch our wallet or purse when a person of color walks past, assuming that they represent a threat to us. Or we may touch the hair of an African American person with curiosity, as though we are entitled to touch their bodies without permission. Though these behaviors may seem minor to us, and are less immediately harmful than other behaviors, they can be exhausting to the people who are subject to them, when they happen repeatedly as a reminder of what it is like to have darker skin in our society. In the small group, we were also talking about how white people can sometimes get pretty defensive around these kinds of discussions.

I said to my colleagues that while I can feel the kind of fragility and defensiveness that were being discussed, I really did not think that microaggressions were that much of a problem for me.

I actually said that.

And then my two black colleagues described examples of their own personal experiences of being on the receiving end of microaggressions, *all the time* – from people who would say things like “microaggressions are not that much of a problem for me” – and I realized, “Oh my goodness. I have done exactly the kinds of things that they are describing.” Not necessarily with malice or meanness, but out of the deeply held assumptions that white people are smarter or better than people of color.

"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." Engaging in a searching and fearless moral inventory is not about trying to make ourselves perfect. "Cutting off your hand" or "tearing out your eye" that is causing us to stumble is not about trying to get God to like us, and it is not about beating ourselves up. The reason it is called a *fearless* moral inventory is because we do not need to be afraid of God. God is with us and for us. Becoming conscious of the ways that we participate in sin is about departing the empires and the kingdoms of fear and greed and hatred, so that we can build a world where the humanity of all people is honored and treasured as much as that of our own.

This is not about trying to make ourselves perfect or correct. We are not saved by perfection, or by our moral behavior, or by getting something right. We are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection. Full stop. Our salvation was accomplished 2000 years ago. It has been accomplished. We have already been saved and redeemed.

The question is, What things are keeping us from living into the full and free and shared humanity that God has given us, and are we ready and willing to let go of those things? What in us is stopping the flow of grace and forgiveness and mercy in our community? Where are we inclined to be judgmental towards other people? What stumbling blocks are we putting before others, causing them to trip and fall in some way, what microaggressions are we committing against others – small remarks or behaviors that we may think are harmless but which contain assumptions that someone else is beneath us in some way? What sins are we committing against others, where in our lives are we enjoying privilege and access and bounty, while others are kept outside? How do those things harm them? How do they harm us?

In closing, we may observe something really interesting about Jesus. In our polarizing time, what we have gotten really good at is dividing up the world into us and them, and identifying and naming all of the ways that *they* are wrong, that *they* are the source of all of our problems, congratulating ourselves for being on the side of the angels while they are on the side of wickedness and evil. What is so fascinating about Jesus is that he does not play that game. Who do *you* say that I am? he asks his disciples. Cut off *your* hand and foot. Biblical, prophetic, Jesus-following spirituality always examines our own lives first, pulls out the plank in our own eye, and only then will we be able to help our neighbor remove the speck from their eye. And it's crazy how we want to twist that text around, because there may be a part of us that wants to say, "Oh Jesus, you must be mistaken. I may have a little speck in my eye, but my awful neighbor's the one with the plank in his eye!"

Friends, Jesus is inviting us to walk with him into the land of freedom, into the beloved community. It is a land without fear, a land of complete humility, where the

neighbor is loved as ourselves. What things are keeping us from joining him? To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.