

Stumbling Blocks
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14:27

“Stumbling Blocks” Pilgrim Church UCC, September 27, 2015, (Mark 9:38-50) Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel lesson is jarring. It's not every Sunday that we hear Jesus say that you need to do the right thing because in the end, it's better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell. Or it's better for you if a great millstone is hung around your neck and you're thrown into the sea than to put a stumbling block before a little one. Why is Jesus so feisty? Because he's talking about protecting vulnerable people. Specifically he was speaking about protecting young children from being sexually abused. And you had better believe that Jesus fought to protect one of the most vulnerable populations in our day too—children. He said don't put stumbling blocks before little ones who believe in me.

Let's explore stumbling blocks: what are stumbling blocks? What are some examples of where we see and experience them? And what do we do about them?

Stumbling blocks are circumstances that cause difficulty or hesitation.

As I define them, stumbling blocks are anything that blocks us from God and our God-given dignity as human beings. Racism, Sexism, Classism, Ageism, Homophobia, Xenophobia—all those -isms are stumbling blocks. Those who hold onto these worldviews are not seeing the inherent worth and dignity of others, perpetuating circumstances that harm people. Those who experience those -isms are having to fight against those stumbling blocks put in their path and feel their inherent worth and dignity questioned. Stumbling blocks are detrimental because they separate us from each other and that's the very definition of sin. Remember last week when Jesus said to the disciples, "Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between me and them."?[1] The disciples couldn't see the dignity of the smallest among us and blocked Jesus and those children from being together. Jesus tore those stumbling blocks down. "Don't ever get between me and them."

So where do we see and experience stumbling blocks?

Last Sunday Viola Davis won an Emmy for Best Actress in a Drama, the first African American woman to ever do so. In her acceptance speech she said, "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there."[2] We like to tell ourselves that everyone is on equal footing and everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. That's the American narrative we've been proclaiming for a long time. But if you're an African American actress in Hollywood (like Viola Davis) and all the leading roles are written for Caucasian women because that's who the writers and the directors and the producers and perhaps even the audience expects to play that part, what do you do? This is how stumbling blocks play out, and it's not always in your face racism that people experience. Sometimes there are hurdles in your path and you have to find your way around them or jump over them if you want to proclaim your inherent dignity as a child of God. Dealing with stumbling blocks takes a toll on a person's spirit after a while. Maybe that's why Jesus was so harsh when he spoke about protecting people and not hindering anyone from getting to God.

Here's another example of where we may see and experience stumbling blocks. Fred Craddock, named one of the top ten preachers in America during his lifetime, once told a story

about a boy born out of wedlock in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. In those days, the whole community knew about it and the boy was ashamed. When he and his mother went into town people would stare at him, trying to guess who his father was. At school, the kids said ugly things so he stayed by himself at lunch and recess. As a teenager, the boy began to attend a little church nestled back in the mountains. The minister was attractive and had a commanding presence, but he was rather frightening. The boy would go just in time for the sermon and then sneak out. He didn't want anyone to ask, "What's a boy like you doing in a church?"

One Sunday some people lined up in the aisle before he could get out, and he felt this heavy hand on his shoulder. It was the minister and he trembled in fear. The minister turned him around and studied his face for a while. The boy assumed he was trying to guess who his father was. The minister said, "Well boy, you're a child of . . . Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy." Then he swatted him on the backside and said, "Now you go claim your inheritance." The elderly man who shared this story with the great preacher Fred Craddock said that this moment was the beginning of his life. Craddock was so moved he asked, "What's your name?" And the elderly man said, "Ben Hooper." Then Craddock recalled vaguely, his father talking when he was just a child, about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a man of questionable parentage—Ben Hooper.[3]

That minister saw young Ben Hooper for who he was—not a boy whose mother gave birth to him without being married to his father—but a child of God. And that encounter with someone who took away a stumbling block put there by some morality police who wanted to shame him completely changed Ben Hooper's life.

Last example of where we may see and experience stumbling blocks. On Tuesday I attended Temple Isaiah's evening Yom Kippur service. Rabbi Jill Perlman and I are Co-Presidents of the Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association this year and when I asked how the High Holy Days were going she invited me to come and experience a service. It was an honor to attend such an important service. The prayers were beautiful, the singing was magnificent, the sermon was meaningful, and the rituals throughout helped me understand Judaism better. Admittedly I felt like a stranger in a strange land though. It wasn't just the Hebrew words and unfamiliar songs, it was looking around at a congregation where I knew hardly anyone. Rabbi Perlman kindly introduced me to a long-time member before the service. But when I sat down, it dawned on me that this is what it must feel like when people walk into a new House of Worship. Even if it's a familiar tradition—you don't really know anyone, you don't know what to expect, and you don't want to look foolish.

As I was contemplating this experience, the elderly man next to me asked, "Are you here alone?" "Yes," I smiled. And he looked at me and said, "Well, not anymore." It was so loving, made even more so by him having no idea that I'm a Christian minister attending a Yom Kippur service for the very first time and I'm feeling a bit self-conscious. Because I have no idea what to expect and I'd prefer not to look dumb and out of place and want to be as respectful as possible knowing I can't even say some of the prayers and sing some of the songs because they're in Hebrew.

Sometimes stumbling blocks aren't always -isms. It could be thinking that your place is here and my place is there and we shouldn't mess that up. You have your religion and I have my religion and the line of demarcation needs to stay in place. And people may feel so uncomfortable experiencing something new that they can't bring themselves to walk through those doors and be inside a House of Worship to encounter God and community. So not only was it a moving worship experience with the good folks at Temple Isaiah, it was a good lesson for how we welcome the stranger. Because there are times when we'll be in that position and

God willing, we will have someone who says to us, "Are you here alone? Well, not anymore." Someone will take that stumbling block out of our path.

So we've defined stumbling blocks as circumstances that cause difficulty or hesitation. My definition is anything that blocks us from God and our God-given dignity as human beings. And we've heard three examples: 1.) Viola Davis saying that: "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there." 2.) The story of Ben Hooper, a boy born out of wedlock who faced shame and judgment from his community. 3.) My experience of worshiping at the Yom Kipur service and all those feelings that come up when anyone steps into a new House of Worship.

Now what do we do about stumbling blocks?

In the case of Viola Davis, she had people who believed she would be the best person to play that part that let her win that Emmy. She got an opportunity. And I have a feeling she will in turn create opportunities for others, maybe she already has because of her moving Emmy Acceptance Speech. In the case of Ben Hooper, he had a minister who saw past the circumstances of his birth and all the town gossip to affirm him as a child of God. That encounter was the beginning of his life. In my case, I experienced kindness and welcome from faithful Jews at a worship service when I was a stranger. Stumbling blocks are best dealt with together.

When we see a stumbling block in another person's path, do we sit back and say, "Well, too bad for them!" Or do we roll up our sleeves and help them move it or extend our hand and help them jump over it or get some heavy equipment and break it down so that no one has to deal with that stumbling block anymore? We have all those -isms in our society. We have people who try to be the morality police and shame people. We have differences of religion that can easily divide us. And Christians have the example of Jesus who shows us pretty starkly in Mark's Gospel that we are called to take away stumbling blocks that get in the way of anyone's worth and dignity. We are called to take away the stumbling blocks that get in our own way and prevent us from seeing that we are accepted, forgiven, and loved by God more than we will ever comprehend. We are in this life together to be at peace with one another. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Mark 10:15, The Message.

[2] Michael Gold, "Viola Davis' Emmy Speech," The New York Times, September 20, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/live/emmys-2015/viola-daviss-emotional-emmys-acce...>

[3] Fred B. Craddock, Eds. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, Craddock Stories, 156-157.