

“The Block”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church
18th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21B) – 26 & 27 September 2015
Mark 9:38-50

To properly understand those harsh words from Jesus about lopping off hands and feet and gouging out eyes, words that cause great discomfort and confusion, we need to view them not in isolation, but in a broader context of scripture. Last week, the story we heard from Mark involved the disciples fighting “with one another” about “who was the greatest.” The twelve were no more immune to competitive impulses than we are. Establishing a pecking order provides structure, something most people crave, and for those at the top, there’s the reward of prestige and authority, as well as a sense of achievement and superiority, but this unseemly struggle revealed their pride and arrogance, their obviously low and uncompassionate opinions of some of their fellow disciples, and their utter lack of humility and the sense of proportion that comes with it.

So Jesus settled the argument in the most startling way. He took a child into his arms and explained that the “first must be last and servant of all.” Children in that culture occupied the lowest tier of society’s hierarchy. They had no real rights, and while most parents cherished their children and felt affection for them, the high priority we place on children, the kind of lavish praise and indulgence so common today, would not have been part of a child’s experience back then. Therefore, the child symbolized what it meant to be last, not first. Jesus wanted the disciples to stop their childish bickering about whom was best and start inhabiting a childlike world of vulnerability, subordination, innocence, awe, wonder, and curiosity.

You might think the disciples got the message, but immediately after this episode, in today’s reading, John complained about a person exorcising demons in Jesus’ name. Now

what's wrong with that? You would think that this would be welcome, a cause for celebration. To cast out a demon is an exceptionally loving and liberating gift. But John's problem was that this person "was not following us," and notice the plural pronoun. It wasn't that this anonymous exorcist wasn't following Jesus. In fact, he cast out demons in Jesus' name. It was that he was not following "us."

Apparently, for John, if you weren't part of the chosen inner-circle of disciples, then no matter how well-intentioned, merciful, or successful your actions they opposed Jesus and his mission. Yet it is John's insular, exclusionary attitude that actually opposed everything Jesus said and did. Jesus was radically, scandalously inclusive of people shunned by society as defective, people told that they did not belong chiefly because they were different or didn't meet some arbitrary standard of purity and holiness. Think of lepers. Lots of skin diseases, like eczema or alopecia, could have earned the label of leper.

Jesus countered John's complaint quickly and strongly, informing John that his project of salvation extended well beyond their little group. "Whoever is not against us is for us." That statement covers a wide range of people, and Jesus made it clear that an extraordinary feat like expelling a demon wasn't the price of admission for being part of the Jesus movement. Even the simple kindness of offering a cup of water proved sufficient for someone to be counted as a faithful follower.

So far, what we've seen is a petulant group of disciples who rejected and sought to judge and exclude people they viewed as outsiders, a group of disciples who squabbled about who among them was superior. We might be tempted to criticize them, but an honest look into the mirror we call prayer will reveal that we, too, exhibit from time to time the tendency to be insular and exclude others, to see our own motives as more pure than other people's, our ideas better,

our choices wiser, our actions nobler. The pride and arrogance and hypocrisy and jealousy that afflicted the original twelve disciples is part of a sinful inheritance in which we all share, to some degree, and we dare not deny that reality, lest we be counted as fools unfit for the Kingdom.

This brings us to one of the hardest sayings of Jesus. “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.” This stern sentence has been misinterpreted and used as a weapon to claim superiority so often that I wonder if Jesus might sometimes regret having said it. I have seen so many people point to this, that, or the other as a stumbling block, and no doubt you have, too. Allow me to share a specific example.

A parish I once served had fellowship and fundraising events similar to what we do here at St. Luke’s, and a great controversy arose over serving alcoholic beverages at them. From what I gather, that’s not much of an issue here. Various concerns were voiced. Some members, active in the recovery movement, felt it was wrong for a Church to place temptation in the path of people walking the rough road of sobriety. Others felt that Church-sanctioned consumption of beer and wine would cause children to be more likely to abuse alcohol, even though we had a strict two-drink limit to promote and provide a health model of responsible drinking. And then there were some who had recently come to The Episcopal Church from denominations that view alcohol as fire water distilled in the deepest recesses of hell. Apart from the risk of eternal damnation, they seemed chiefly concerned with how serving adult beverages would damage the parish’s reputation in the broader community. It was quite the dilemma, and the one scripture quoted by every group was the “stumbling block” verse.

This is merely one example, and I don’t mean to denigrate the parishioners who fiercely advocated their positions. They might have been right, and even if they weren’t, I am have used

the “stumbling block” verse as a weapon, principally against self-professed fundamentalists. Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas comes to mind, and a neighboring congregation that many of you call Six Flags Over Jesus. I view these people as placing numerous obstacles, chief among them a self-righteous, judgmental attitude that results in exclusivity and claims of superiority. Ironically, every time I do so, I become just as judgmental as the people I accuse of being judgmental, and in the process I assume a superiority that doesn’t belong to me. I demarcate boundaries that exclude, and that whole process is a vicious cycle that leads nowhere except to misery. Your prayers are welcome as I and as all of us strive to resist temptation and seek to repent and be forgiven when resistance crumbles under the weight of fear-driven anger.

I also want to make clear that Jesus’ words, including the “stumbling block” verse, can be interpreted to apply to a wide variety of different situations. However, as we interpret and apply scripture to our lives, we need to stay attentive to the original intent, as best we can discern it, and to broader context within which a particular verse or passage is situated, and then allow those factors to guide our understanding.

In the case of the verses I like to call “the stumbling block/chopping block” passage, it is the disciples’ attitudes and behaviors in the immediately preceding verses that seem most relevant. Insularity born from a sense of superiority, exclusivity born from judgment, the twin sins of jealousy and pride born from an insecurity that derives from weak faith, arrogance born from lack of humility, all of things appear to be what Jesus was referring to when he warned against placing stumbling blocks. And any behavior rooted in the attitudes just mentioned also serve as a stumbling block.

Discerning where these sins are present involves an ongoing process, in which we need to commit ourselves to the truth that we and others will often get it wrong, declaring some things as

stumbling blocks when they are not and denying other things as stumbling blocks when they are. To endure through this process of discernment, where honest mistakes will inevitably be made and sometimes identified only long afterwards, requires a generosity of spirit that comes from God's grace alone. It requires humble patience to wait and see whether or not a potential stumbling block is one or not. Often only the experience of a thing enables us though hindsight to perceive our errors, for which we can then repent of and take corrective action. It requires a readiness to forgive with a Christ-like love that can transcend our fear and anger and feelings of scandal and betrayal, and all of these things – discernment, commitment, endurance, humility, patience, forgiveness, and above all refraining from judgment -- require sacrifice, just as Jesus said.

Now none of us needs to sever a hand or a foot or scoop out an eye with spoon with a spoon. Jesus spoke, as he does so often, metaphorically. Self-mutilation does not serve God's purposes, and I emphasize this because some people do cut and burn their bodies, motivated by self-hatred, shame, and a sense of worthlessness frequently fostered by exclusion and judgment from other people, including the Church. Some Christians flagellate themselves, whipping their backs, as a way of self-punishing for sin. Jesus wants us to sever from our spirits the sin that threatens to destroy us entirely. Again, this proves difficult, because what seems sinful to one person may seem saintly to another. John genuinely felt that he was doing the right thing by reporting and condemning this anonymous exorcist to Jesus as someone acting outside what John perceived to be proper authority.

I wish it were simpler than this. Sometimes, in my more sacrilegious moments, I wish that the great and glorious mystery of God could be reduced to a series of certitudes that tell us exactly what to do and believe, exactly what's right and wrong for every circumstance, like

whether to serve alcohol at parish even. But God is sovereign, free to do as He chooses, free to surprise and scandalize and take creation in new and unexpected directions, as He did when he sent his Son to be Incarnate as a human being. If we had full and complete certainty, then we would know the mind of God, and if we knew the mind of God, then what need would we have for faith? So our work continues, always, empowered by the Spirit of grace, anchored in the faith of Jesus and in his limitless love. Amen.