

“From Rock to Stumbling Block”

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 30, 2020
N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Romans 12:9-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Matthew 16:21-28

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Many coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16:21-28)

Last week he was called Rock by Jesus. This week, Stumbling Block. Last week Simon, the rock, upon which Christ’s church would be built. This week Simon, a block to Jesus’ lifetime mission to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. Poor Peter. Such a short time; such a massive fall from grace. What’s a follower to do on this roller coaster ride called discipleship?

I have often wondered how Jesus said what he said to Peter as it is written in our Gospel passage today. Was his voice sharp, accusatory, angry? Or was it soft, low, sad, frustrated, sounding distressed, and weary? Jesus’ response to Peter was reactive. Perhaps it felt like what happened to him during his wilderness time after his baptism, just before he would begin his ministry. Did Jesus now feel Satan breathing through Peter, Satan finding an opportunity in one of Jesus’ closest disciples – one who had just shown so much faith when he had identified Jesus as Messiah, Son of the living God.

Peter is a disciple we can identify with. He doubts, he denies; his faith journey is like a roller coaster, up and down. Just when he reaches a peak, he comes crashing down again. Peter, as a major character in the Gospel story is a real gift to us two thousand years later because he is so human, so both blessed and flawed as he tries to follow Jesus. His story ultimately is one of amazing grace. The hope for ours, too.

At the end of the Gospels Peter succumbs to the lowest depths of his relationship with Jesus, denying Jesus three times, denying that he even knew Jesus. He is the prodigal follower, like the prodigal son in Jesus' most famous parable who puts ultimate distance between himself and the Father and finds himself in the muck and mire of the pig sty. And yet both prodigals, Peter and the prodigal son are ultimately welcomed back. We see this with Jesus with Peter at the end of the Gospels when Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" Peter takes the gift of this and answers "Yes" three times. Jesus responds, "Then feed my sheep." Peter will spend the rest of his life, trying to do this. However, my guess is that the roller coaster ride never stopped. That is the nature of life as a human trying to follow Jesus.

And that's what the rest of this Gospel passage is trying to prepare us to be disciples for if they want to follow the Way of Christ. This passage is called the "hinge" passage in the Gospel of Matthew. It marks the threshold between Jesus' Galilean ministry and his turning his face towards Jerusalem and the destiny waiting for him there. It is his first prediction of his death and it stuns his followers what the future holds. Peter is just the first to state the "No, it can't be so!" shock reaction they all are harboring. That even one of his disciples, the most vocal one, of course, refuses to believe, to comprehend what is to come is a stumbling block. Not just for the disciples, but for Jesus too. That is why Jesus says, "Get behind me!" and says it with such frustration.

In some ways this is good news for us. It seems that Jesus is implying that he cannot do this thing alone, this bringing about a way of life that God desires for God's people. The Gospel story is not about a lone hero coming to earth and accomplishing his mission all by himself. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus chooses companions, disciples. He attracts followers and some respond to his teachings and some do not. Some follow for awhile and then drop away. Some

follow, doubt, try again, fall back, then try to catch up again, try to continue along the Way, stumbling along the Way, but keeping on, keeping on. Sound familiar?

This hinge passage is tough. Jesus is facing his disciples, his followers and saying this is what it is going to look like if you come along. There will be a cross to carry; there will be suffering. You will need to deny yourself, your ego ways that block the way forward for you to follow a higher authority. You will need to lose, give up old ways of life to live into new life. You will need to de-prioritize your self-full life and live a self-less life within my Way of life. You will need to deny your self if you want to follow me to new life. “Choose now!” Jesus is saying. “Do it now, because the way ahead is tough.” Jesus wants us to know what it looks like as we step onto the path. So more on what this path looks like. This Gospel passage is paired with a remarkable passage from Romans.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21)

This is a beautiful passage curated from Paul’s life as one who had been a major stumbling block for the Way and followers of Jesus after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Then a blinding light on the road to Damascus transformed Paul from stumbling block to building block for the Christ Way. And yet it was a rocky path for Paul, a roller coaster ride from beginning to end. This passage has a beautiful light about it, but it too, like Jesus’ words to his disciples, is tough and confrontational. It too is a hinge passage. Describing what life as a Christ

follower looks like, what that kind of life hinges on. It fleshes out what Jesus is trying to say in his deny self to follow me Gospel passage. This passage is kind of like a check list. Not complete but certainly shows us the way we need to live if we are going to help Christ bring about the “kingdom” Way where God (Creator/Redeemer/Spirit) is the ultimate authority and author of more abundant life for all that God created to live well, to live towards wholeness and harmony.

This is what Satan (or whatever we call that which opposes “good” and wants to destroy life) opposes, this Way of love, compassion, wholeness, harmony and good. Jesus could see this happening to Peter, as Peter was overcome by negativity and “began to rebuke Jesus.” How easy it is for us so human to become a stumbling block to the mission of the Divine. Paul’s instruction is so timely and so interconnected with the Gospel message. Paul concludes his teaching based on Jesus’ teaching and life with “Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” Easy to say; tough to do.

As I reflect on these two passages, I, who like you, want to be a faithful follower of Christ, need to consider ways in which I, very humanly, become a stumbling block for the Way of Love and Good that Jesus showed us and calls us to day by day. Because, deep in our souls, don’t we all want to be building blocks in God’s hands, not stumbling blocks for our Savior and each other. Maybe I need to use this passage from Romans as my spiritual, reflective practice day by day for a while, till it becomes inscribed on my heart, ingrained in my mind, and organic to my being. Yet, knowing I will fail, again and again. And Satan will grin and check out the cracks and crevices in my spirit, an opportunist just waiting to snatch my heart, mind, and spirit away for his negative purposes. It is then I need to remember the words of the Psalmist in today’s Psalm, “Search for the Lord and his strength, continually seek his face.” (Psalm 105:4). Knowing that amazing grace waits for me. I may be lost again but desperate to be found again, a prodigal on the Way to be welcomed back, yet again.

May it be so

Torrence

A Spiritual Practice for the Week: Praying, singing, humming Hymn # 654

Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:

To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly,
day by day.