**September 30, 2018**

**Mark 9:38-50**

 Last week all Presbyterian churches were sent a FREE! book written by Ken Ham, a well-known Christian evangelist. Ham is a biblical literalist; he believes that everything in the Bible is historical fact. For example, he believes that everything in Genesis is literally true -- that the earth is only 6000 years old and the first person’s name was actually “Adam”, and that a flood covered the whole earth for 40 days. Ham is not Presbyterian, nor are his beliefs widely shared by many Presbyterians. Many friends and colleagues who received his book promptly sent it to recycling. But I figured that since he went to a lot of trouble to mail me a free book, I’d do him the courtesy of thumbing through it.

In the first pages of his book Ham wrote, “Many Christians today fail to fully understand the gospel, and therefore are unable to share it effectively.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Well, I’d say that’s the understatement of the year. Ham then went into detail about how he fully understands the Bible, and why so many *other* Christians are wrong. Most of his 150-page book was dedicated to lambasting American Christians (particularly millennials), distinguishing the many “fake” Christians from the much smaller group of real disciples. His writing reminded me of the old joke, “No one understands what God really wants except you and me. And I’m not so sure about you.” (pause) In his defense, I truly believe that he wants to help the rest of us. He wants us to get in the right camp. He wants us to know the truth.

 Some Presbyterians might agree with Mr. Ham, but most of us are pretty far outside his boundaries. Presbyterians tend to live in a different camp of Christians. And most of us are glad to distinguish ourselves from Christians who believe what Mr. Ham does. We go out of our way to tell other people that we aren’t like *those* Christians. “Oh no no no no! *We* don’t read the Bible literally. We believe that science and evolution are compatible with Christianity.” Of course, on Long Island, the more talked-about division is that between the Protestants and Catholics. People think that there are HUGE differences between us, going so far as to call us different religions (which we are not – we are all Christian). Reactionary Presbyterians are worried that our worship services should not be too much like the Catholics – so they don’t want to sing a particular hymn or receive Communion a particular way or use particular words when they pray. Reactionary Catholics are worried that their members want to be more Protestant with women serving in ordained positions, or with local congregations acting in opposition to their Bishop or larger church position.

 Practically speaking, from an organizational leadership perspective, it is important for people to understand how we are different from our neighbors and why we are different. Practically speaking, if we *aren’t* any different, we are the same. And if we don’t want to be the same, then we must make a bigger distinction about our differences. So we Presbyterians brand ourselves in a way that is distinguishable from Roman Catholics. We offer different services. We offer a specific product (theology and programs and such) for a specific group of people.

 All this to say that I understand John’s desire for crowd control here in Mark’s Gospel. He wanted to clarify the message people were sharing about Jesus. He was trying to be a good leader, keeping his group within their approved guidelines so that they presented a clear and unified message. The public relations and publicity had to be consistent. That’s easy to do when your organization is small, but as news spread and strangers talked and people engaged Jesus 3rd and 4th and 5th hand, it was impossible to keep everyone on the same page sharing the same information in the same way. Like a firecracker exploding, with colors and sparks flying in many directions, an organization’s reach takes innumerable paths from the center.

John told Jesus, “Teacher, someone was casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But apparently, Jesus didn’t care. He wasn’t concerned. He replied, “Let them be. Whoever is not against us is for us.” We’re all on the same team, guys! We’re working toward the same goal. We’re serving the same master. Don’t sweat the small stuff. Whoever is not against us is for us. (This is a message that we need to send back to Ken Ham. Whoever is not against you is for you.)

Then Jesus proceeded with a warning, “If any of you put a stumbling block before a little one who believes in me, it would be better if they drowned… in fact, if anything causes you to stumble, cut it off, tear it out, get rid of it. It is better to live without part of your body than to live in sin.”

Jesus was trying to tell them not to worry about all the official business – sponsors and the chain of command and the approved elevator speech. Don’t worry about the issues. Instead, pay attention to the people involved. Pay attention to one another. The community – especially the vulnerable ones. And pay attention to the pot holes and stumbling blocks that trip you up. Worry about whatever sin is in your life. However *small* you think it is, it’s big trouble -- way bigger trouble than that guy doing something that you think is out of line. Your judgment is the bigger problem. Your judgment is the stumbling block that trips everyone up, so get rid of it.

If only this philosophy guided our church politics, perhaps Christians wouldn’t leave their congregations and denominations over semantics and petty arguments. If this philosophy guided our national politics, perhaps political parties wouldn’t be divided over the best response to victims of sexual assault. If this was the philosophy that guided our international politics, perhaps we wouldn’t have so many armed borders or so many homeless refugees.

Stumbling blocks are easily named when they are out there in front of us – the crazy drivers that make us lose our temper, the websites that make us waste time and money, the ice cream that tastes so good you have to eat a whole gallon. Those stumbling blocks are easily identified and separated because they’re not part of us. They make us do bad stuff. But Jesus reminded John and the disciples that stumbling blocks aren’t determined by our personal preferences. “Your greatest enemy is not over there. It’s not *that* guy who you think is your rival. Your greatest enemy is within you.” [[2]](#footnote-2) You need to focus on your issues, on your own heart and mind and soul, on your own habits and behaviors.

“If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.” Jesus was clear that anything that draws us away from him must be dealt with immediately and radically, in a dramatic and cringe-worthy sort of way. Just as a woman has a mastectomy to cut out all of the cancer out of her breast so it cannot infect the rest of her. Just as an alcoholic gives up drinking because one little drink could re-infect the body with an insatiable desire for more. We all have a weakness for things that can spread and grow, disseminating poison throughout our entire body, heart, or mind. Drugs or alcohol, pornography or infidelity, gossip, nagging, or greed and stinginess, self-righteousness and spiritual arrogance... The list of pot holes and stumbling blocks could go on and on.

Jesus used harsh language because he wanted the disciples to recognize the insidious nature of sin. He pushed us to acknowledge how bigotry, jealousy, love of money, pride leads to behavior that harms us and others. For the alcoholic, it is just one glass of wine. For the gossip, it is just one little story. For the sexually promiscuous, it is just one innocent flirtation. For the power hungry, it is one more notch in your belt. Whatever your temptation, cut it out – radically and completely, because if we do not, it will infect, poison, and destroy God’s hold on our lives.

This kind of stumbling block is not fun to think about. It is not nearly as fun or easy as pointing to someone else or some*thing* else outside us, over *there* that is wrong or bad. This kind of thinking prompts intense self-reflection and self-awareness that is probably painful, for it requires honesty about the ugly and unhealthy side of ourselves. These are the kind of things that you can only admit to yourself, and you don’t even want to admit it then.

In these words, Jesus reminds us that honesty in self-reflection improves your own faith, and also that of the community’s. We are removing the stumbling blocks within ourselves as a way of caring for those around us, so that our sickness doesn’t spread to others. Inasmuch, this passage underscores the responsibility that teachers and leaders and each member in the church has for the other members. Our self-care is also an expression of our care for creation and care for the community.

This passage also shows that however frustrated we get with one another and however much we would like to leave some folks out of the best/right group, however much we would like to point at *those other* Christians, in God’s eyes, we are one and the same. God calls us all God’s children. Jesus is glad we are each doing our best to love and serve God. But Jesus knows that our best isn’t good enough. We are vulnerable to stumbling blocks within ourselves and beyond ourselves.

Next Sunday – World Communion Sunday – we will live into the spirit of this text. Our friends in the *Centro Misionero* congregation, as well as the new Catholic church worshipping here, will join us for our regular Sunday morning worship. Our slightly different flavors – Pentecostals, Catholic, and Presbyterian – will share the same prayers, the same confession, the same forgiveness, the same scripture, then together turn to share one meal at the Table, feasting on God’s grace. It would be easy for any of us to point at the other and say, “but they don’t do it right.” or “This isn’t how we understand it.” But for one day, we will attempt to remove the theological and practical stumbling blocks between us, instead exemplifying the kingdom of God where there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female, but where all are one in Christ Jesus… with one calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all… “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

As we prepare for this magnificent feast next Sunday, this week practice giving others the grace that God gives us all. Instead of spending time and energy looking for all the ways that *other people* are wrong this week, take time to reflect on how your own actions cause others to stumble or even fall. Then come to worship, at peace with yourselves and one another. Amen.

1. Ham, Ken. Gospel Reset: salvation made relevant. Master Books, 2018. pg. 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brian McLaren. “A Sermon for Every Sunday” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ9Ud16mNGw [↑](#footnote-ref-2)