

Stumbling Blocks in the Race of Faith

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen on September 26th, 2021 at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church

As I was preparing for this sermon today about “Stumbling blocks” I couldn’t help but have this image in my mind from something that happens frequently in our household. In our home, we have a galley kitchen, which runs right through our main floor and is accessible from two sides, meaning that you can walk in a circle around the kitchen. Since we moved into the house in 2015, it has been common practice for our all our kids, but most recently for Theo, to run in circles around the kitchen, often racing me or one of his brothers while listening to music. Well, from time to time, there are a few too many obstacles—ok, let’s be honest, clutter and mess—in the way, and we sometimes have some tripping or stumbling. Sometimes the stumbling block is a toy, a shoe, a backpack, a piece of paper, the list goes on. By now I have become aware: if Theo’s in a racing mood, I better check for anything he might stumble over and get it out of the way so that he can enjoy his race.

This image of Theo racing around and having to avoid stumbling blocks is perhaps a fitting image for us this morning as we explore Jesus’ words of warning to his disciples to not be a stumbling block for others *and* to watch out for those things that might cause them to stumble. After all, the life of serving Jesus is often spoken of in the New Testament using the image of running a challenging race: an activity that requires practice and discipline, focus and an awareness of terrain, proper hydration, and an attitude of perseverance to make it through the highs and lows. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, for example, encouraged the church to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and...run with perseverance the race that is set before us...” and in his letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul encouraged believers to run the race of faith so that they might receive the imperishable prize

of eternal life (1 Cor. 9:24-25). The life of faith is like a challenging race, and we are encouraged to give it our all.

But scripture also recognizes that this race of ours is difficult, that it has its challenges and its moments where our human failure to live fully into the life God intends for us is exposed. Sometimes we lose focus while racing; we trip, fall, or stumble into sinful and unhealthy personal and communal attitudes and habits; and sometimes our stumbling becomes the occasion for someone else's stumbling as they try to run the race of faith together with us. In his fiery letter to the church in Galatia, an exasperated Paul said to the church there: "You began your race well; who came to obstruct¹ you and stop you obeying the truth?" (Gal. 5:7) Paul's letter to the Galatians gives us a glimpse into a moment in that church when someone disrupted the stride of a community as it sought to live out faithful discipleship. Someone placed a stumbling block on the path and suddenly the pace slowed, and people started tripping over one another, falling like a row of dominoes.

The image of the "stumbling block" first appears in scripture in Leviticus 19:14, where we read:

You shall not revile [people who are] deaf or put a stumbling block before [people who are] blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

Biblical scholars have a few of different interpretations of the meaning of this passage and the image of the stumbling block in particular. I think all three interpretations will be illuminating for our exploration of Jesus' warning about stumbling blocks since, while all three share

¹ The Greek root *koptō* in the verb "to obstruct" (*anakoptō*) here is shared by other verbs used by Paul that translate "to stumble" (*proskoptō*) Rom. 14:21. The other common verb that Paul employs for talking about causing someone to "stumble" is *skandalizō* (1 Cor. 8:13) from where we get our word "scandalize." This latter verb is the same one that Jesus uses in Mark 9:43-47.

similarities, they helpfully emphasize different aspects of the problem we face with stumbling blocks.

First, some commentators argue that in ancient cultures, people who were blind or people with disabilities were often socially ostracized or taken advantage of (and let's be honest here, we have the same problem). The commandment in Leviticus not to "put a stumbling block before the blind" was thus a literal command to take care to protect and care for people with disabilities and provide them meaningful opportunities for involvement in the community just like everyone else.²

Second, however, there is a more metaphorical interpretation of this passage that sees "those who are blind" here as anyone that might be "blind" to someone's true intentions in, let's say, a business deal. An ancient Jewish commentary on this passage puts it this way:

The law, 'Thou shalt not set a stumbling block before the blind,' is extended to mean, 'You must not hide part of your intention in giving advice to a [person.]' You must not say, 'Sell your field, and buy a donkey,' when you are really intending to circumvent [them] and get [their] field.³

This interpretation nicely captures the way that a "stumbling block" can also be understood as a kind of "trap" or "snare" set for someone who is unsuspecting. Here the commandment against laying a stumbling block in front of someone relates much more to the day-to-day call to deal justly and honestly in the goings on of community life.

Finally, a third interpretation comes by way of yet another Jewish rabbi:

Rabbi Simai said: The evil inclination [*yetzer*] is like a big rock, which stands at the cross-roads, and people stumble against it. The king said, 'Crush it little by little, till I come and

² See a parallel passage in Deuteronomy 27:18. Also, for commentary on this interpretation of this verse, see for example <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/leviticus-and-work/holiness-leviticus-1727/rights-of-people-with-disabilities-leviticus-1914>

³ "Sifra 88 d." in *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 404.

remove it altogether'; so God says, 'The Evil Inclination is a great stumbling block; crush it little by little, till at last I remove it from the world.' (*Pes. K. 165 a.*)⁴

Here the “stumbling block” is more generally compared to the evil inclination of human beings which is often the occasion for sin. Here the sin might be perpetrated either by the person laying the stumbling block or by a person who stumbles over the stumbling block or perhaps both. This interpretation might be the more familiar one for all of us who, at various points in our lives, have heard preachers or leaders in the church use this verse to prohibit all sorts of lifestyle choices that might be considered a ‘stumbling block’ for others. And let’s be honest, sometimes this warning against stumbling blocks has been taken to the extreme or misused to such an extent that all the responsibility for preventing someone from stumbling is placed on the shoulders of one party to the exclusion of the other party’s equal and in some cases greater responsibility.⁵ Clearly what counts as an “occasion for stumbling” will sometimes require community discernment and cannot be established once-for-all through universal norms or laws.

So, now we have three interpretations of what a “stumbling block” represents:

- 1.) A barrier literally placed in the way of people with disabilities, those who are vulnerable, or those in low social positions

⁴ *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 296.

⁵ For example, in a culture (ours) that continues to grapple with forms of toxic masculinity, many feminist theologians are rightly critical of ways that some Christians use the idea of a “stumbling block” to control or comment on the ways that women dress, ostensibly in order to ‘protect’ men from being drawn into temptation. Here the onus is too often placed entirely on the responsibility of the woman to dress ‘modestly’ (however that is to be defined) while it is assumed that the man cannot possibly avoid temptation if the woman does not take action to remove the temptation (“boys will be boys,” is a common phrase used here to justify the men in their misdeeds). This is, it seems to me, an application of Jesus’ warning about stumbling blocks that is damaging to both men and women.

- 2.) A metaphorical “trap” or “snare” set for someone unsuspecting in, for example, a business deal or other community matter.
- 3.) The evil inclination that is present in every human being that could lead one into sin.

In our passage for today from the Gospel of Mark, it is Rabbi Jesus who is teaching about stumbling blocks. Perhaps the three interpretations that I just outlined can help us come to a greater understanding of Jesus’ teaching here. In the passage Lorna read, we saw that initially it was the disciples who were laying down a stumbling block of sorts. Jesus had to tell the disciples not to stop someone from ministering in Jesus’ name just because they didn’t belong to their group of disciples. When Jesus said, “do not stop that person,” he was effectively saying: don’t put a stumbling block in their way! We already saw two weeks ago how prone the disciples had been to argue with one another about who was the greatest. And now the disciples were upset, and perhaps a bit jealous and insecure, about others who were serving effectively in Jesus’ name. They thought that they were it: the closest allies and friends of Jesus! Using the interpretation of a stumbling block as an ill-intentioned trap, we might ask: when they told the man to stop, were they really trying to help him? Did they really think that if they could get him to be part of their group first that his ministry would *then* be better or more authentic? Or were they really concerned about their own status, and stopping this man was a sneaky way of securing their status as “greatest?” Perhaps they were trying to lay a stumbling block for this man: “If you come with our group, you will be a legitimate disciple!” But, then we can just imagine what happens next: “Now that you are a part of us, let’s talk pecking order. You....you’re on the bottom!”

Using the interpretation of stumbling blocks as our human inclination to evil, here we could also say that it was the disciple’s inclination to pride and fear of the other that threatened

to be a stumbling block for them and for this individual who was only trying to serve in Jesus' name. Their inclination toward pride and fear of the other led them to see the world in an "us-them" mentality that said that unless others joined their group—the "us"—they must, by definition, somehow secretly be working "against" Jesus and his disciples. The attitude of the disciples towards the ministry of others thus became exclusionary: "If you are not **for us**, you are **against us!**", a politically fraught and dangerous attitude if there ever was one.⁶

Jesus' attitude, however, was the opposite: ***Whoever is not against us is for us.*** (Mark 9:39) Maybe we could say that Jesus was trying to teach his disciples to chip away at the "big rock" of their pride and fear of the other and instead be ready to partner with or at the very least "not forbid" those who were not against Jesus—even if such people don't immediately strike them as his disciples. Jesus widened the circle of those who could be considered his disciples so much so that he says to his disciples, as long as those you encounter ministering to others in my name haven't declared or demonstrated that they are against us, assume they are a friend; don't stop them. By taking this approach, then, we might say that Jesus sought to expose to the disciples their pride and fear of the other, along with perhaps also their ill-intentions in stopping the man. But that is not all!

As Jesus continues, he says:

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. (Mark 9:42)

⁶ This or some version of this phrase has often been used by world leaders to try to get people on "their" side and make a clear division between "friends" and "enemies." Some might remember that similar words were used by President George Bush in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a warning to all nations of the world: "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." See: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150112170258/http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-a-2001-09-21-14-bush-66411197/549664.html>

Can you imagine the disciples' response? "Woah! Chill, Jesus." But Jesus is dead serious, and here, with Jesus' reference to "these little ones," we see perhaps yet another interpretation of stumbling blocks come out in Jesus' words. Who are "these little ones" that Jesus warns against putting a stumbling block in front of? Again, there are several options: children, those who are socially disadvantaged, people with disabilities like blindness, or those who were relatively "young" in the faith and so vulnerable to being negatively influenced or deceived. All of these are likely implied by Jesus here and they fit well with Jesus' claim that he has come to fulfill the law, here Leviticus 19:14. Jesus is telling the disciples: take care to protect, care for, include, and learn from "these little ones." Don't place barriers in their way as they run the race of faith. Remember, if you want to be great, you must be ready to be the last, in solidarity with the least, these little ones.

After warning the disciples against putting stumbling blocks in front of others, however, Jesus advises the disciples on what to do about the stumbling blocks that they will inevitably face in their lives. Using some highly exaggerative language, Jesus tells them to do everything possible to avoid whatever it is that causes them to stumble:

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell. (Mark 9:43-47)

Commenting on this passage, biblical scholar Tim Geddert notes:

Literal mutilation is not intended here, nor would such mutilation actually bring anyone closer to life. The point is that there are activities we engage in (with the hand), places

we go (by foot), and things we see (with the eye) that can become sources of temptation. Using graphic hyperbole, Jesus says, *Cut it off,...cut it off,...tear it out.*⁷

Here Jesus' exaggeration to "cut it off" and "tear it out," while extreme sounding, is not that far off from that Jewish commentary we read earlier which compared the human inclination to evil as being like a rock that you need to "crush little by little" until God takes it away entirely. We need to work at chiseling away at those individual and communal attitudes that can become sources of our temptation to sin. Take note, however, what Jesus does not call us to do: when Jesus identifies the fact that our hands, feet, and eyes can lead us into individual and corporate sin, he does not call us to shame or to fear.⁸ He is not a "fire and brimstone" preacher, speaking primarily about how our actions will determine where we end up after death. Rather, Jesus is interested in the *now*. What will you do with your hands, feet, and eyes today to serve God? Fear and shame, on the other hand, are dangerous emotions that immobilize us. They are also easily manipulated, and they are very poor motivators for pursuing the good. Jesus does not call his disciples to shame and fear about the reality of human stumbling, but to sober honesty about our human tendency to choose wrongly at different points in our lives. In turn, Jesus also calls us to be resolved in chiseling away at the attitudes that lead us to those poor decisions.

As human beings, we know that stumbling stones are plentiful on this race of faith and that we cannot avoid them. In fact, we also need to acknowledge that stumbling stones can be productive tests of our faith, and we know that, in spite of the danger they pose, tests of faith can also make us stronger and our ministries more attractive. Jesus makes this clear to his

⁷ Geddert, *Mark*.

⁸ Geddert notes that the "reference to hell/Gehenna...is used as a motivator to serious discipleship, not as a threat to unbelievers. This text says that discipleship is costly; there are things to be given up, but it is the way to life."

disciples as well: "...everyone will be salted with fire," he says. Every one of Jesus' disciples, in other words, will face stumbling blocks in the race of faith. But that doesn't *need* to be a bad thing! Fire can burn you, but it is also commonly referred to in scripture as a mode of testing and purification (1 Cor. 3:12-15) and it was almost always used in the Old Testament when making offerings to God. Similarly, stumbling blocks can trip you up but they can also be part of your training to be an even more perceptive racer, more mindful of the best path forward. The hard work of overcoming stumbling blocks can give your ministry a good flavour and seasoning, a fragrant offering, well pleasing to God! "Be salty," says Jesus. Have good flavour—a flavour that comes from offering yourself as a living sacrifice to God in the midst of life's trials.

As disciples of Jesus on this race of faith, we are invited today to heed Jesus' warning to avoid those things that cause us to stumble. May we "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1), following Jesus in bringing forth the kingdom of God's mercy, peace, and justice. AMEN.

Possible Second Hour Discussion Questions:

1. Different people will encounter different stumbling blocks throughout their lives. Some stumbling blocks are much more hidden and interior, others are more external and visible; some are experienced on a more individual level, others on a more public, communal level. What kinds of stumbling blocks have you encountered in your "race of faith?" Have you ever found them helpful (ie. Positive tests of your faith)?
2. Of the three kinds of stumbling blocks discussed in this sermon, which do you find yourself most concerned about for yourself and/or for the church as a community? Why?