

Growing up in Iuka, suburb of Pratt, when I was in grade school a bunch of us kids would meet at the tennis court/basketball court across the street from my house to play basketball after school. This would happen 2 or 3 days a week depending on the weather. It was fun till the junior high/high school kids showed up. No offense to any of them who might be watching online, but they were kind of jerks. I'm certain they didn't want us little guys around and they played rough. I would regularly go home roughed up having stumbled from their blocks. /

This kind of behavior isn't exclusive to the playing grounds of my youth. When I was in retail, I'd occasionally run into someone trying to make their way up the corporate ladder who didn't care who they stepped on to get to the top. They caused more harm than good from my perspective. I can too easily name and too quickly blame people, events, and circumstances that have tripped me up, interfered in my life, or kept me from getting what I wanted. Stumbling blocks. (pause) / (1)

My guess is that every one of you could tell stories about the stumbling blocks in your life. Who or what have been stumbling blocks for you? How did they get in the way and cause you to stumble or fall? Did you meet a stumbling block this past week? If so, what happened? /

Today's gospel tells a story about John and the other disciples running into a stumbling block, an outsider who, as John tells Jesus, "Was not following us." John does not say that this guy interfered with the disciples' work, that he had a different purpose, or that he opposed them. He simply says, "He was not following us." Never mind that the guy was casting out demons in Jesus' name. He was not one of them, and that seems to be their stumbling point. /

I can't speak directly to what that meant for John and the other disciples. I know that today it often means the other does not look or dress like us, the other does not speak or act like us, the other does not think or believe like us, the other does not do it our way. He or she is not following us. Whatever it was for John and the disciples, they felt threatened by this guy. He was casting out demons, alleviating (2)

oppression, offering a new life, all in the name of Jesus. Chances are the guy was getting a name, status, and recognition. (pause) /

Last week the disciples argued among themselves about who is the greatest. This week they are complaining about this other guy, this stumbling block to their status, power, and recognition. (pause) /

I wonder if this might not be a variation on last week's argument. You remember how that ended, with Jesus taking a child into his arms and saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." I said that the child is a symbol of vulnerability, powerlessness, and dependency of another, regardless of age. /

Today's scripture is a continuation and part of last week's story. It's essentially one story told in two weeks. Jesus and the disciples are still in the same house as last week, the child is still on Jesus' lap, and Jesus is still deepening and moving the conversation inward. /

John, however, wants to make the conversation about this other guy, this stumbling block. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out (3)

demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” (pause) /

Isn't that what we often do or want to do with our stumbling blocks? We draw lines in the sand, circle the wagons, divide into us and them, and then, try to stop them. I see that happening in the world today. I read it in the news. And I've done it. I've been John, haven't you? (pause) /

Jesus, however, takes a different approach. He erases the line and enlarges the circle. He isn't so concerned about another who causes us to stumble. His concern is focused on us, not the other, and it's twofold:

- First, whether we have become a stumbling block to another, “to one of these little ones,” to the child sitting on his lap, and
- Second, whether we have become a stumbling block to ourselves.

Jesus is once again asking us to look at ourselves, to be self-reflective. It's as if he saying to John, “Don't you worry about that other guy. You worry about yourself.” He's asking us to look within. The greatest stumbling blocks are not outside us but within us: anger and revenge, the judgments we make of others, prejudice, our desire to (4)

get ahead and be number one, the need to be right, our unwillingness to listen, the assumption that we know more and better than another, living as if our way is the only and right way, pride, fear, being exclusionary, our busyness, lies, gossip, our desire for power and control. These, and a thousand other things like them, are what cause others and us to fall.

(pause) /

In what ways have you and I become stumbling blocks to another or to ourselves? That's the unspoken question in today's gospel. When have we caused another to trip and fall? When have we tripped and stumbled over our own two feet, our own life? (pause) /

And it's not only looking at ourselves as individual stumbling blocks. The greater stumbling blocks are systemic. In what ways is the legal system a stumbling block to justice for all? In what ways has patriotism become a stumbling block to another's freedom? In what ways is the Church a stumbling block to Jesus and the life he offers the world? In what ways have you and I participated in and perpetuated those and other systemic stumbling blocks? (pause) / (5)

This is **HARD** work. It's neither an easy nor comfortable conversation and I don't like it any more than do you. But it's work about which Jesus is adamant. You can hear that in the images he uses: drowning by millstone, the amputation of hand or foot, the torn out eyeball, the unquenchable fire, hell, the worm that never dies. We don't need to take those literally, but do we need to take them seriously.

(pause) /

Jesus uses those images four times to talk about our betterment. "It is better for you...", he says. That's what this work is about. I want us to be better. I don't want to be a stumbling block to another or to myself. And I don't think you do either. I want us, as Jesus said, to "be at peace with one another," don't you? That begins with looking at ourselves, not at each other. (pause) /

///// In what ways have we caused ourselves or someone else to stumble? And what might we need to change or give up in order to step into our better selves? As individuals? A nation? A church? (Long Pause) / (6)

Here's what's been on my heart this week. What if our mantra this week was, "First, do no harm?" What if we made that the guiding principle for what we would say and do? What if we committed to help one another live into our better selves? What if we were more concerned about another's success than our own? What if John had offered that other guy a high five and a word of encouragement? (pause)

Maybe, just maybe, we would know ourselves to be building blocks rather than stumbling blocks. And wouldn't you rather build than tear down? Amen.