

Our Stumbling Blocks

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21, Year B
September 27, 2009

Recent studies by the Barna group, the Gallup organization, and the Pew Foundation on religious trends in the United States tend to show American citizens as a religious (perhaps spiritual?) people. After all, a large percentage, 80 to 90%, say they do believe in God. Perhaps a better phrasing of that would be that they believe that there is a God. But when asked about attending worship on a regular basis, the numbers change and shift: only 40% say they go to worship regularly. Further examination shows that even that number is wishful thinking, for when researchers counted actual attendance at worship services, that number changed to about 18%. An interesting statistic in what is considered to be one of the most religious Western cultures on earth—showing an obvious disconnect between what one professes with one’s lips and what is lived out in one’s life.

Among young adults, those statistics change and shift even more. Many (about 25%) are unchurched—having no regular connection with a faith community, or have grown up never setting foot in a house of worship. Now, many are seeking—saying they believe that there is a God or higher power and are interested in spiritual practices—but they are not necessarily seeking in a Christian direction. Often they have become dismissive or turned off by what is deemed as ‘Christianity’. Diana Butler Bass, an author and religious commentator, recently quoted a statistic that a large percentage of young people instead readily associate the word ‘hypocrite’ with ‘Christian’. Many have no problem with Jesus and his teachings—it’s his so-called followers they have issues with. I think it may be fair to say that we who call ourselves Christian may be Christianity’s worst enemy.

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In recent weeks, we have heard James' words about living out our faith in our lives, his saying that faith, by itself without works, is dead. Words are not enough, he indicates; our words need to line up with how we live our lives. But we need to watch our words as well, for they have power too. And all too often, neither our words or actions reflect the life of Christ into which we have been baptized. We fall woefully short, and even more disconcerting, we are not even aware that we have fallen short. In the face of these recent statistics and culture of our pluralistic, post-Christendom society today, never have James' words and admonitions rung so true.

Today, we hear Jesus' warning to us that we should not be a stumbling block to those who believe in him—in very graphic terms. Words that indicate that we would better off being thrown into the sea to drown or should practice self-mutilation seem out of line with Jesus' words and character, and indeed they are. But you have to admit, they grab one's attention—and if you're at all like me, make us more than a bit uncomfortable. Surely he can't mean that literally, right? Jesus shows forth God's desire for redemption, for reconciliation, for love and salvation; he welcomed the outcasts, healed people and restored them to wholeness—he didn't go around separating us from our body parts, did he?

Well, no—but he did ask us to separate ourselves from some other things—things that keep us from a full and complete relationship with God.

These things that separate us from God are not likely to be a body part—but they are very often very dear and close to us. Like a body part, we could not imagine life without them. We would

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grieve their loss, have to make adjustments in our lifestyle to live without them. And yet, like a gangrenous limb, they can cause us much harm.

So what are these things that can get between us and God? They are many and vary from person to person—money and wealth, feeling a need to be in control, an all-consuming profession or hobby, addictions; feelings such as shame, anger, bitterness, hatred. Anything or anyone that we look to for security and a sense of self-worth other than God, value or trust more than God, or desire more than our relationship with God can become a stumbling block in being the person we are called to become—a child of God, living into this new life of love we are baptized into.

It is hard, this separating ourselves from those things that separate us from God. Even with all our striving, we often cannot achieve this on our own. We need to recognize that in this relationship building between us and God, God often must do the heavy lifting—as God has in Christ Jesus in breaking the bonds of sin and death, and God continues to do for us in so many ways. We need do our part—but the first step in doing that is to ask for help, to let God in, to acknowledge our need for change. In plain theological language, this turning to God and away from things that separate us from God is called repentance from sin, and to our 21st century ears it can sound all so harsh. But it is not meant to be—it is meant to be life-giving, a source of joy and wonder, a new start. It is a chance to walk free and strong, free from stumbling.

But as God is willing to help us remove those stumbling blocks from our lives so we can walk free, so we are called not to be a source of someone else's stumbling. If we as Christians, or 'little-Christ's', are to invite others to know and love Jesus as we are called to do, then we must

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show them through our words and actions, in the way we live our lives. But even as we try very hard to live a call to a life of love and hospitality, mercy and compassion, peace and justice, we must also acknowledge that our Christian life is a journey and not a destination. In other words, we will make mistakes—sometimes tragic ones—along the way. And somehow, we must convey that is part of the Christian experience as well—that even when we make mistakes and get it wrong, we can admit that to ourselves, to others, to God; ask for forgiveness and start again. That God has not written us—or anyone else—off for good, and shown that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That this being a Christian is not about perfection achieved through our own doing but rather about a loving relationship lived with God and others because of God's doing through Jesus.

We have come to a time in our history where it is more important than ever to truly live out our Christian faith, to boldly embrace our baptismal vows. The old structures of Christendom—from state-sponsored churches to a culture that assumes everyone is at least aware of basic Christian principles—is fading away rapidly. We can choose to meet this challenge through the use of scare tactics, fear, or appealing to a sense of nostalgia; or we can begin again and commit ourselves anew to a life of compassion, peace, and generosity, living lives of service and love in all aspect of our lives. Hopefully we will choose the latter, and live a life that is a distinct and unique as the salt we are called to be.

Amen.