

“The Stumbling Toward Life”
Psalm 105:1-4; Romans 12:9-21;
Matthew 16: 21-28

August 30, 2020
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Get behind me, Satan! Now *that's* a phrase you really want to have somebody say to you. That's an incredible statement that Jesus makes, and he is saying it to the very same person to whom he had just told that it was his faith that was the rock on which he was going to build the church. That's perhaps one reason why I don't think Jesus is telling Peter the first time that it is really just Peter that he is building the church on. It is Peter as that quintessential disciple, as the one who shows the faith of a disciple. Because now what he is saying is you are showing how a disciple can take what the world is feeding you or what you think you know, and try to use that to shape what Jesus is to be and to do.

As much as Peter may be saying it out of real concern for Jesus, he is trying to correct Jesus. He's trying to tell Jesus that he's not doing it quite right. It seems that this one who was the rock all of a sudden has turned that rock into a stumbling stone. He would have Jesus stumble on his journey to do God's will, follow God's way. He would have Jesus do something different than God's will for him.

It's fascinating to me that they use this phrase, stumbling stone, here because it is also used of Jesus in a different situation. Here, Peter is the stumbling stone of the world to the one who would want to do the divine will. Jesus later will be called the stumbling stone for those who want to do the world's will. Stumbling over Jesus in going after the worldly way, invites us to see in that stumble that there is another way.

But here is Peter telling Jesus what he should do. After all, who wants to hear that the one who is leading you is going to suffer and die. He misses the final piece of that—the rising again—probably because it doesn't make a ton of sense to him. But, in the process, he tells Jesus how it is. He has just been told he is one of great faith, which makes me wonder how often we begin to believe we have great faith and that is the very moment at which we become a stumbling stone for others. My great faith tells me how you should live your life. My great faith puts me above you. I'm superior to you and now can tell you how you should do things.

I can even tell Jesus what he should do. I certainly feel like I have experienced that at various points in my life. I have probably done that to people, as well. But I remember more the other side of that. A friend telling me he didn't think he could be my friend anymore because he was pretty sure that my interpretation of scripture was wrong. What great faith we have that can divide us into camps, into groups of people.

It feels to me like what we are doing is taking on the way of the world. The world tells us that to be successful is to be the one that's right. To be successful is to be the one in power. To be successful is to be the one who is in charge, who is superior.

It's hard, then, to hear Jesus, who doesn't say, “If you want to follow me, I'll take you to the top. I'll give you all the control. I'll give you all the power. I'll give you all the worldly things you want.” Jesus says something very different here. “If someone would

want to follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” The world tells us not to deny ourselves, but to find ourselves. To go find our identity wherever that identity may be hiding.

There is the sense that we have some identity we can find out there in the world if we just do the right set of things. I was listening to a podcast yesterday on the plasticity of the brain and how the context we are in tends to shape who we are. Certainly, cultures and social systems tend to show that. We grow up in those and they shape who we are. That’s our identity.

When Jesus says to deny ourselves, it feels to me like what he is saying is, “You’ve got to let go of the world telling you that you can know who you are by what it is feeding you, what it is showing you.” In fact, he goes on to say, “You have to lose your life.” I think we have to lose the life that the world tells us is the way to go. The world tells us that if we’re in power, if we are in control, if we have the ability to overcome our fears by protecting ourselves, that we are finding ourselves.

Jesus says you have to lose that life that the world would give you. “If you would follow me, deny yourselves and take up your cross.” It’s a change of where we look. Do we look to the world to define us and shape us, or do we look to Jesus? He says whoever would lose their life for his sake is a follower of Jesus. He’s telling us something very different than the world would tell us. He’s telling us that we should love our enemies. That we should care for those who persecute us, and even pray for them. That we should not create division, but find a way through that to reconciliation. We should find our way to be the people of God, not the people of the world.

When I was younger, my wife had some friends who went off to be missionaries in Africa. I wondered at the time how they could give up this life we had in the United States. They must be missing so much. And now I wonder if they weren’t the ones who found the richness of life, while I got trapped in a pattern that just repeated over and over again.

It seems to me that as Jesus is speaking about what it means to follow him, there’s a lot of letting go. In a world in which we have become so entrenched in our own positions, we are sure we are right. We have that solid faith that we are right to the point where we are willing, it seems, to kill one another. To make one set of people less valuable than everyone else, or at least, less valuable than us. To find our salvation, our protection in violence, in guns, instead of finding our hope, our faith, our solid place in Jesus.

Jesus goes on to say that he will come, and the word is “repay,” but there’s a sense that there will be a consequence for the actions of our lives. As Jesus is telling Peter that he is trying to make him stumble into a way that is not the way of God, he is inviting us to see that there is a different way. We have to let go of the way of the world and that if we don’t, there are consequences one way or the other. If we go after the ways of the world, he says we will lose our lives. There are consequences to what we do, how we live, how we live together, or not.

There are consequences to our lives. He says that the feeling of losing our lives, that feeling of letting go of the way the world would define and shape us, is the only way we truly find real life, the life he leads us into. It is the life that begins, I believe, with the grace of God come in Christ and the grace of God shared in our lives.

We can tear ourselves apart by thinking that we have power we need to use to defend ourselves, to overcome our fear through violence or power or division. It is letting go of that fear, looking and hearing Jesus as he says, "Let go of that stumbling block and look to where I will lead you." Because it is in losing our lives that we find the fullness of life, the real life that Jesus gives us, the way of being whole people.

I feel like I live in a world that's being torn apart because we are unwilling to care for one another. We can't even wear masks to care for one another because somehow it interferes with *my* freedom. Jesus invites us to let go, to follow him. He doesn't say there won't be any suffering. After all, he is willing to suffer and sacrifice his life for the good of all. Yet, it is in and through that suffering and sacrifice that God brings life that is real and full and wonderful.

It feels to me that the world has thrown that out. But I, for one, continue to look to Jesus. Still, I struggle. I wonder if I'm not a little like Peter. I wonder what Peter's reaction to Jesus was when Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!" Did Peter say, "Wow, I've really done something that was out of step. I need to reshape my life. I need to think again." Or did Peter react with, "What is he talking about? I'm giving him good advice. He should listen to me." That feels to me like the two ways I can go. I can try to listen to what is being said and try to work with the one who is talking to me, or I can just retreat into defensiveness. If I retreat into defensiveness, I've shut off communication, I've shut off the way of being able to work things out.

So often people tell us that following Jesus' way of being good people will make us lose out on life. I think that's one of the greatest falsehoods of the world, telling us that being good, following Jesus, will make us miss out on life. That's just what evil does. It takes something and twists it, and makes it look like what is good is wrong and what is wrong is right. There is way too much of that in our world.

I have to keep my eyes on Jesus. I have to remember to focus on what Jesus is telling us.. It is not about protecting myself. It is not about my fear. It is not about my way of seeing things. It is about listening to him. It is listening when he says to love your enemies. Listening to him when he says to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Listening to him as he says to love your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Jesus invites us to recognize that there will be consequences to the way we live our lives, and with God there is grace. I depend on that grace. I believe we all do. It is only as we are able to give grace to one another and try to work together and let Christ lead us that we have real hope. As we lose the life the world would give us and follow Christ, we have a real life. I want that real life. Even if I stumble toward it, I want that real life. I want to follow Jesus, and not the ways of the world. How about you? Amen.