

“From Rock to Stumbling Block”

Matthew 16:21-28

**First Presbyterian Church
August 30, 2020**

Writer Paul Galloway says the ultimate factor that gave rise to Christianity is the new ideas it brought to light. “The simple phrase, ‘For God so loved the world,’ would have puzzled an educated pagan,” says Galloway, quoting sociologist Rodney Stark. “The notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd.”

He says this because, at the time of Jesus, the Greeks and Romans saw mercy as a character flaw, not a Christian virtue. They valued justice, not mercy. “Since mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it was contrary to justice.”

And yet, says Stark, “Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues – that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover,” he says, “the corollary that because God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they love one another (and others) was something entirely new.”¹

In other words, Christianity gave rise to the idea that God wants us to love one another and extend grace and mercy to others, even if the world does not, even though the world forever struggles with unconditional love and unmerited grace. In fact, it was just such a spiritual struggle that Peter was having when he rebuked Jesus, saying, “God forbid it, Lord!” Only to have Jesus told Peter he’s setting his mind not on divine things but on human things, worldly things.

In our New Testament lesson today, Jesus reveals who he truly is – the embodiment of God’s love and grace and mercy – over and above the horrific and heartless ways of the world. Horrific and heartless. When Jesus says he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised, he’s talking about the horror and heartlessness of being falsely accused, unfairly tried, and brutally executed, all for the love of God.

We’re talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus, and what that means for us and our world. For Peter that day being confronted by Jesus’ impending death and resurrection meant going from “Rock” to “Stumbling Block.”

¹ Paul Galloway, "How Jesus Won the West: Christianity became dominant because it offered better ideas and unexpected mercy," *The Lutheran*, November 1998, 19.

Just one chapter earlier in Matthew, Jesus changed Peter's name from Simon son of Jonah to Peter the Rock, the rock on which Jesus would build his church. And now, in the very next exchange between them, Jesus calls Peter Satan, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me!!!"

Poor Peter. God forbid we should ever find ourselves going from "Rock" to "Stumbling Block." And yet, we do it all the time, even though God would forbid it, God does forbid it. Take for example, the judge who had the opportunity to show another human being a little grace and mercy, even if that person was a convicted criminal with a long record of breaking the law. The jury had found him guilty on 33 counts and the judge sentenced him to 189 years. The prisoner, realized that even with time off for good behavior, he would be over 100 when he was released, and he burst into tears. The judge saw this display of remorse and said, "I didn't mean to be so severe. I can see that I've imposed an extremely harsh sentence. So, you don't have to serve the whole time." The prisoner beamed with new-found hope, until the judge added, "Just do as much as you can."

We struggle all the time trying to work out God's grace and mercy amid this fallen world of ours. We struggle all the time to put the Christian values of love and grace and mercy ahead of our worldly concerns. And yet, it is only in God's unconditional love – and the unmerited the grace and mercy of the Lord – that we, ourselves, escape what we deserve as the fallen, defiant, misguided human beings that we are. Don't believe that describes you -and me?

Well, if you're in a loving relationship – whether as a spouse, parent, child, brother, sister, aunt, uncle or best friend – you know that you've said or done something that was truly unloving, maybe even already this morning. And yet somehow – by some miracle – that spouse, parent, child, brother, sister, aunt, uncle or best friend still loves you. That's Christ-like love.

If you've ever given to charity – whether through the church or someplace else – you know that what you personally give isn't enough to bring an end to poverty and need. And yet, you give it anyway. That's giving from a place of grace.

When you stare into the eyes of a loved one who's dying and tell them you'll see them in heaven, even though you've never actually seen heaven and have no earthly way of knowing what it's like, that's an act of mercy. Unconditional love, unmerited grace, and unwavering faith in the mercy of the Lord, that is Christianity. And believe it or not, Christianity is what Peter, the other disciples and people the world over – us included – struggle to understand and embrace, day in and day out.

We are all both Rock and Stumbling Block when it comes to living out the faith. We rise or fall at anytime depending on our spiritual condition and what it is we're up against. The stronger our faith, the more we can overcome, personally and collectively.

Christianity is a cooperative faith, after all, a faith lived out in a community. This is what Jesus is saying when he tells the disciples – tells us, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

In this one-sentence command and calling we see that becoming a follower of Jesus – being a Christian – requires three things:

One, denying the self. Or in other words, giving of yourself for the sake of others.

Two, taking up the cross, or in other words, accepting that suffering and even death is a part of life, while knowing with your very being that in Christ, we are victorious over death and suffering.

And three, being a Christian requires us to be a follower of Jesus. In other words, we must take each day as an opportunity to become a better Christian – even amid and especially amid – our fallen and misguided world.

Unconditional love for God and neighbor, unmerited grace and mercy – given and received – and unwavering faith in Jesus come what may. Sounds simple, doesn't it? And yet, it is so hard. Why do we struggle so much at being good Christians?

Jesus gives us the answer when he says, “... Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Saving ourselves, saving your life- implies that we're in charge, that we have everything well in hand, that if it were only up to us, all would be well and good in this world. Of course, we know better. As Christians, we know that it is only in Christ that we or anyone else is well and good.

Jesus also said; of good Christians “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” Seeking worldly profit at the expense of our soul – boy, that's a tough one. It's the age-old dilemma – selling your soul to the devil, so to speak.

Of course, none of us would sell our soul to the devil. And yet, whenever we put our wants over the needs of others, we are putting worldly gain ahead of our Christian calling. Jesus continued, saying, “... What will they give in return for their life- these good Christians?” Of course, it is God who gives us life, and there is nothing we can do to repay that gift, or any of the blessings we receive. And thankfully, we do not have to.

As Christians we're eager and thankful to proclaim that Jesus is the one who gave his life that we might live. Jesus is the one who calls us to give of ourselves – not for personal gain – but for the sake of others in need. Jesus is the one who God raised up as our personal Savior, yes, but more importantly, as the Savior of the world.

When Peter rebuked Jesus, saying, “This must never happen to you,” he was focused on keeping Jesus for himself, as his personal savior. Instead, Jesus turned Peter’s focus outward, toward a world in need.

And so it is with us. When we keep Jesus for ourselves, we’re treating him like our personal Savior. But when we give ourselves to Jesus, we’re shining light on Jesus as the Savior of the world, and standing alongside God as he works that out in the hearts and minds and souls of his most cherished creation. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Great and loving God, we thank you for the teachings and life of Jesus Christ, through whom we come to know you. We acknowledge that sometimes what we learn from him is difficult, Lord.

We are not readily given to self-denial or cross-bearing, so we ask for faith and courage to follow in the ways of Jesus.

Give us a bolder vision of who we can be in you. Grant us deeper compassion for others that selfishness might not take hold of us. Inspire us to love and give to others as a thankful response to your love and gifts for us.

For apart from you, O Lord, we can do nothing. We don’t even know how to pray correctly apart from your Spirit and teachings, teachings that gave us the prayer we join together in now, the Lord’s Prayer, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;**

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen