

Clearing the Way for Jesus

Mark 9:38-50
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

For generations, adult children have agreed to take their aging parents' possessions during a downsizing – whether they actually wanted them or not. But now, the anti-clutter movement has met the anti-brown-furniture movement. And this means that thrift stores and online marketplaces end up inheriting the family dining room set, the sterling silver flatware, and all the other household treasures that need a good home.

When adult children say “no thanks” to the family heirlooms, the stress and upset that follows is not just about the unwanted items. That’s according to Len Fishman, a nationally recognized leader in the field of aging and senior housing. “It’s happening he says, in the context of downsizing. “Your world was expanding, and now it’s beginning to shrink,” and you have to decided what’s really needed in life. When it comes to following Jesus, it’s all about trying to expand what’s good in life while shrinking the not-so-good. It’s all about our possessions and what possesses us, what has ahold of us.

With an eye toward expanding or growing our faith and the church, Jesus says in today’s New Testament lesson, “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.”

Setting aside for a moment the part about being thrown into the sea, this statement by Jesus shows us the level of his concern when it comes to actively bringing new people into the family of faith, those who are just discovering – or rediscovering – what it is to be part of a church.

What sort of stumbling-blocks might get in the way of someone new to the church family, or someone in need of reconnecting here? A lot of churches stumble over their welcome mat, or lack thereof. People come to worship or some other church gathering and don’t feel welcome or don’t feel like their presence is important.

Of course, it is important that you’re here today. And as for new people feeling welcome, we have a great welcome mat here at First Church. Y’all do a great job of making others feel welcome. I think all our new section leaders in choir would attest to that, right? It’s true. I hear it over and over again from visitors and new members – that other churches don’t have the same spirit of welcome and genuine interest that we have here at First Church.

Now of course, there are other stumbling blocks when it comes to church life. It can be really hard for people to find their place in existing groups and church gatherings.

In order to remove that stumbling block, we have to take that extra step of inviting new people – and those who've drifted away – and then actually bring them with us to a group or gathering here at church, whether that's Wednesday Night Live, helping with this year's Thanksgiving box-lunch, joining the church decorating crew afterwards on that same Sunday, or attending any of our small-groups and circle gatherings.

Now, I know it's easier to just do a church project or go to a church event by yourself. It's easier than bringing someone new along. I know it's hard to ask again after we've asked and asked, invited and invited, reached out and reached out. But that's what it takes these days. To have more folks come across the threshold of our wonderful welcome, we have to keep the spirit of welcome alive, we have to let it energize our invitation actively helping more people to take the next step, helping them find their place in the life of First Church.

After Jesus tells us to help clear any stumbling blocks that get in the way of others he turns to the stumbling blocks that get in our way as followers of Christ. Jesus makes this really personal, saying, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. ... If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. ... 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...."

It seems we don't have to look too far to find those things that are keeping us from reaching our potential as followers of Christ. God is reaching out his hand to you right now, putting your feet on a new path right now, trying to show you right now how to receive that special blessing he has for you at First Church.

Maybe it's a little financial assistance, an expression of heartfelt care and concern, a wise suggestion or a listening ear, maybe it's a group of new friends he's guiding you to, a new activity that is truly life giving. Whatever it is that's blocking you, there is a way past it.

And the first place Jesus looks is at our hands, our feet and our eyes what we look at. What we look at. I'll bet that if you actually paid attention to the things that are in your hand, the places that your feet take you, the images that catch your eye – if you paid attention to your hands, feet and eyes for just one day, you'd notice something along the way, that doesn't belong there. Think about it.

Jesus is telling us to take notice of the things we cling to, the places we spend our time, and the visual clutter we give in to everyday – pay attention to these things and be sure they're not getting in the way of what's really important in life, what would a blessing to your life and the lives of others.

Everyone gets led astray from time to time. Everyone needs to be mindful of their habits and actions, their attitudes and reactions. Even those with the best of intentions need to be sure they're not being led astray. Take for instance the pastor walking down the street one day who notices a young boy trying to press a doorbell. The boy was very small and the doorbell very high, too high for him to reach. After watching the boy stretch and stretch but never reach his goal, the pastor walks up behind him, places a kindly hand on the child's shoulder, and leans over to give that doorbell a good, solid ring. Crouching down, the pastor smiles and asks, "And now what, my little man?" "Now ... we run!" says the boy.

I thought you might like that one for Halloween. But hey kids, don't run tonight. Stay at the door for some candy. And then when you get done Trick or Treating, give some thought to how all that candy you've got in your hands could be a blessing, a gift to someone else in your house (maybe an adult), or someone at school or in your neighborhood, someone who didn't get to go out for Halloween.

The point is we shouldn't use our hands to cling to things so much that they get in the way of doing what's right, blessing the lives of others. We shouldn't allow our feet to get so settled in life that it keeps us from going where Jesus is leading us.

And we shouldn't allow our eyes to get so consumed by all the visual clutter these days – the Internet, gaming, TV, and video chats – that we miss out on spending time with others, or simply gazing at the Lord, searching our hearts for how God might enrich our lives.

God doesn't want anything to get in the way of your spiritual growth as a follower of Jesus, or the growth of His Church. If you feel that your faith life has grown stale or stalled out, take a good look at what's taking up your time, what's demanding your attention. I guarantee you there's something there that you could put down in order to let God build you up. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, your people need you. They need your love, your grace, and your unending mercy. They need to know your truth, to experience your peace.

God, they need your guidance and your wisdom. They need your strength.

God, they need all of these things, and we know that you can give us all that we need. But, God, let us never seek after only the things that you can give. Give us, first and foremost, yourself.

We pray your Spirit of peace and comfort upon those who grieve.

We pray your healing touch upon battling illness and disease.

We pray for ourselves, Lord, that you would draw us to yourself. We need you, first. We love you, first. We desire you, first in our lives. Hear our prayer, O Lord, as we pray together as you taught us, 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.