

A Stumbling Block

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Text: Matt 18:1-14

Little Jerry was just a few months old when Marie brought him to church. Sometime during the sermon, he began to cry – as babies often do. The congregation held their collective breath, waiting to see what would happen. But nothing happened. Except this pastor paused and said, “Listen. Do you hear that? A baby is crying in church. That means a mother is in church and wants her child to grow up in the church.” They started to breathe again. We found out afterward that before we came, when a baby cried in church, the pastor’s wife would get up, take the child from the mother’s arms and take it to the nursery. As you might imagine, the pastor’s wife’s behavior meant that there weren’t many infants in church.

Well, little Jerry grew, and learned to walk. And you know how little ones are – as soon as they can walk, they run. And one Sunday morning, during the sermon, little Jerry got away from his mom. Marie made a bold grab for him and missed, and then sat embarrassed as her toddler ran toward the platform. I paused long enough to scoop him up in my arms, and went on with my sermon, holding Jerry. After a few moments, he got squirmy and I called Marie to come get her baby. Again, I paused only long enough to hand Jerry to his mom, and went on with the sermon.

I tell you this for a reason: children were important to Jesus, and they are important to God. When children grow up in the church, they are less likely to have trouble with the law. They are less likely to become alcoholic or drug addicted. They are less likely to drop out of school, have children outside of marriage, and less likely to experience divorce. It still happens, of course, because they have free will and sometimes choose to rebel. But as they learn the Scriptures, learn about the Christian life, grow in their own faith and accept the Lordship of Jesus, they are more likely to do well in school and be successful in marriage and their chosen career. They are more likely to be compassionate human beings. When children grow up in church, they grow as Jesus did, *in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man* (Lk 2:52).

I think it was the great preacher, Dwight L. Moody, who made a remark about the success of an evangelistic service, noting that he had three and a half converts. A man replied that the half must have been a child. “No,” Moody replied, “there were three children and one adult. You see the children gave their whole lives to Christ; the adult has only half of his life left.” When children are loved and accepted in all their childishness, not only does the church prosper, but the children do as well. When churches only tolerate children, and make it known that children are an inconvenience and an interruption, children and families with children are likely to be scarce. And those children who do endure such churches soon find reasons to turn their back on the church and all it represents. We’re a little way from it yet, but Jesus will later scold the disciples for trying to keep children away from him (Mt 19:13-14; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17).

Our text today begins with the disciples asking, *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* This seems to have been an obsession with them that intruded even on their Passover celebration. As they were celebrating the Last Supper, Luke recounts that they began to dispute among themselves *as to which of them was considered to be the greatest* (Lk 22:24). Matthew reports that the mother of James and John went to Jesus asking that her sons sit at his right and left when he became king – seeking a place of power and authority over the others – and the others were rightly outraged at such a request (Mt 20:20-28). We’ll come to that in due time, but I only note here that the disciples seem to be consumed with their own self-importance. I’ll also note that it seems to still be a concern for many, this pursuit of greatness, often at the expense of others and often at the expense of peace in the family of God. It was the struggle to be the greatest that led the Bishop of Rome, Damasus I (AD 366-384) and his successor Siricius (AD 384-399) to declare themselves pope, or the father of fathers, and to declare that the Bishop of Rome was the superior. Prior to Damasus, the bishops were considered relatively equal in status.

But the kingdom of heaven is not like the kingdoms of earth. Jesus will have to hammer on this several times, and we still don’t get it. But here’s the answer. The disciples ask who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and as we see later on, they were probably consumed with which of *them* was the greatest. Jesus’ answer is, “Not you. Nor you. Nor you. None of you.” And he called a child to sit with him.

This is now the fourteenth time Jesus has begun a teaching with *“Truly I tell you ...”* *“Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* You must become a different sort of person, with a different mind-set, a different world-view. Unless you convert, change, turn around, and become child-like ... What does that mean?

Unless we “educate” it out of them, children are curious, adventurous, inventive, artistic, musical, but most of all innocent. They don’t know they are in danger. They want to turn over rocks just to see what’s hiding under. They want to see into dark caves, climb trees, slide down hills. They sing silly songs not knowing they are silly songs. You’ve heard the story about the little girl working away on her drawing. Her mother asked what she was drawing. “I’m drawing a picture of God.” Her mother protested, “But nobody knows what God looks like.” The child answered, “They will when I’m done.” They are imitators and their hearts are pure and good. They are unafraid until we make them afraid. They are noisy, rambunctious, and have no inhibitions, until we adults start shushing and shaming them. A toddler in church pulls her dress over her head, not knowing she has anything to hide, until we embarrassed parents “correct” her. What if we were like that – curious, creative, innocent, unafraid, imitators of good things, with hearts pure and good? What if we were unashamed and didn’t care if someone thought our songs were silly? What if we lost our pride and our “adult” reserves and fear of what people think and say about us? What if we prayed child-like prayers again, without all the thees and thous and Victorian embellishments? What if we came to Jesus with the same fearlessness and confidence and a love of a child jumping into Daddy’s arms? And what if we just stop shaming those who do?

“Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Which is why there are so few truly great Christians – because we want to be great in the

world, and great in the way adults consider greatness. We are embarrassed to be child-like. But it's also why we will probably never know the names of those who are truly great in the kingdom.

Now, the kicker for many churches: *"And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."* Children are not welcome in many churches. Oh, they say they are, because they provide a nursery, children's church, and other activities for children. I have come to believe that children belong in worship with teens and adults. Over the years, I've observed the churches that separate babies into the nursery, separate children into children's church, and separate teens into some form of teen "church". When the children grow into adults, they have no connection with the congregation. "Adult" worship feels strange to them and many leave and never return. We say children are welcome, but then we push them aside so they don't bother us while we worship. But children need to see you in worship. They learn by example. They need to hear you sing. They need to see you tithe. They need to see you listening to the sermons. Most of all, they need to feel like they are a part of what happens in worship. They need to feel like they belong to the family of Christ. What is the corollary to "welcoming a child welcomes Jesus"? Not welcoming children is the same as not welcoming Jesus. And Jesus goes there:

"If anyone causes one of these little ones ..." Pause to hear that: "If anyone ..." Anyone. Jesus isn't talking about people outside the church; he's talking to his disciples – to us. *"If anyone causes one of these little ones - those who believe in me - to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."* Children are precious to Jesus, and if we have a hand in turning them away ... If we have a hand in causing them to lose faith ... If we have a hand in denying them access to the Savior, Jesus says, the punishment is severe.

There is enough in the world to cause us to stumble and fall. There is enough in the world that can cause us to lose hope and to lose our faith. There are powers at work opposing the work of Christ in the world - and in the church, by the way. A couple weeks ago, we talked about the adversary, Satan, who opposes your faith and wants to separate you from Christ. Even things that are good on their face are used by Satan to disrupt and destroy your relationship with God. Jesus condemns that in the strongest words: *"Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble!"*

"Such things must come ..." Why? It is the price we pay for free will. Stumbling blocks are often choices – will you follow Christ or will you accommodate the world? Will you give up or will you move forward? Stumbling blocks test and try our faith and our faithfulness. God gave Adam two trees and a choice.

"Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!" Again, a very strong warning. Just a note: In the Greek, this phrase begins with an exclamation of alarm. It may mean *alas!* or *woe!* or *calamity!* Alas for the person who causes others to stumble. Calamity to those who cause someone to lose their faith. In other words, don't be that person. The consequences are severe.

How severe? Well, let's approach this last portion with caution. Jesus tells us how severe the consequences are for those who are stumbling blocks to the faith of others. The reason we need

to look at this with caution is that some people have taken it literally, and maimed themselves. Jesus did not intend for us to maim ourselves. This is not an accommodation of sin, but a reason to reject and avoid sin. Let's read it and then comment.

"If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell."

First of all hell is a reality and a dangerous possibility. What Jesus is saying here is that it is better to go to heaven maimed than to go to hell whole. The point is though, that you don't go to hell. The point is that sin separates us from God and we need to be set free from our sins as behaviors and thoughts, and our sinfulness as our state of being. Jesus is telling us to turn our backs on sin. The way to deal with sin is not to gouge out your eye or cut off your hand - but to stop sinning. In fact, it does you no good to gouge out your eye and go on sinning with the other one. It does you no good to cut off your hand and go on sinning. The way to deal with sin is to stop.

If your eye causes you to stumble, try changing what you're looking at. If what you hear is causing you to sin, how about changing the radio station. Change the channel. Read different books. If your foot is causing you to stumble, maybe you need to change your destination. Stop going to the clubs and bars. If your hand is causing you to sin, maybe change what you hold onto. The way to deal with sin is not to gouge out your eye or cut off your hand; the way to deal with sin is to change what you look at and what you are doing.

The point Jesus is making is that sin is serious. God takes it seriously. There comes a day of judgment, when God must act as a good Father and tell you, "Child, I love you, but ..." When our children do wrong, we discipline them. We do not excuse them and say, "Well, because I love you, I'll let it slide." God doesn't let sin slide. In fact, God takes sin so seriously that Jesus went to the cross because of it. He *made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Cor 5:21). He was, John the Baptist point to Jesus, "*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (Jn 1:29). God did not accommodate sin, and he doesn't want us to, either. He wants us to respond to his loving invitation to lay aside our sinfulness and receive his gracious forgiveness and be reconciled to God.

Stop sinning. Come to Jesus.