

Mark 9:38-50

**Obstacles to Grace©
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Dr. Sharlyn Gates

What are the things you can think of that – as Jesus warned the disciples of – are stumbling blocks for others? Jesus is quite clear in his grave warnings that anyone who follows him should be very careful to not put stumbling blocks in front of those whom he calls the “little ones” who believe in him.

We mentioned those little ones last week as Jesus welcomed the children – and all who are vulnerable and easy targets for bullying or oppressing.

In this conversation it seems that the little ones are also those who are new to the faith – new Christians who might easily be misled, or discouraged in their understanding of who Jesus is.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that for the last two weeks we heard Jesus teaching the disciples – his closest, handpicked followers – that to follow him meant to put themselves last, not first; to be least, not the greatest; to be a servant for all – serving with compassion and love and self-sacrifice.

These 12 guys seem to be awfully hardheaded, don’t you think? Jesus barely finished teaching a lesson and they go right into another example that shows they did not listen, or did not understand!

Remember last week, Jesus said to be great, you must be like a servant to all? But here they come, tattling on other people who are the “outsiders,” not those who are in the “in circle” with Jesus.

The Message translates it this way: “Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn’t in our group.”

Doesn’t that sound childish? There are all kinds of emotions we might hear in that sentence. Struggling with power, wanting to be the only ones who can really do those miracles – the in-crowd verses the outsiders; jealousy – that these new, less experienced believers could do some of the most powerful miracles, even though they hadn’t spent much time with Jesus. Maybe the disciples liked the glory of being close to Jesus and did not want to share that place of honor; maybe they thought they had the correct way of doing things, and others did not.

Jealousy, pride, selfishness, competition – all are stumbling blocks that can become obstacles to receiving the grace God offers through Jesus.

David Lose, one of my favorite commentators wrote about this passage:

Scholars tell us that this particular section reflects some conflicts between early Christian communities. Mark is framing this part of his narrative, in other words, to address some of the problems his folks are having with other Christians. Apparently the early Christian church wasn't all united in their beliefs, sometimes clashed with each other, and occasionally even berated one another over differences in practice. (Hmmm, sound familiar?)

Sounds very familiar to me! In fact, I think I could raise my hand as one of those who get trapped in that competition between our little church and other churches – between Presbyterians and other denominations or especially, NON denominations.

If we think about it I think we might all of us admit to comparing ourselves with other churches – especially those that are growing in leaps and bounds while it seems we are shrinking in numbers.

(Maybe we should add envy to those stumbling blocks.)

I have actually heard discussion about sending a group of people to other churches that are growing, to observe what it is they are doing right, so we might copy them.

I have been asked before why it is that one of our large nearby churches had 2,000 attendees at an Easter service and we only had just over 100. And I admit to feeling defensive and a little inadequate, at the time, in the face of those kinds of questions.

But I have to say, I think the small church has many challenges, but the one I have come to decide is not a necessary challenge, is to be in competition with the large church. We are who we are – a vital, mission-oriented church that offers important faith-filled opportunities to many people.

Faith is not a competition, but we, like the disciples, can get caught up in being competitive, if we are not careful.

David Lose agrees that much of this is about identity. He goes on in his commentary to say:

... Mark was trying to help his congregation answer the question of who they are. Will they, he asks, define themselves over and against other Christians, or will they discover their identity in their attempt to follow Jesus, to care for the vulnerable, and to avoid those things that are destructive to self, neighbor, and community.

Of course, this isn't just about congregations defining themselves. It is also about each of us, as individuals. We have a great deal of pressure, in our culture, to strive for

showing who we are by our accomplishments, our place in the community, by where we live and what we live in, by the work we do, by the way we dress or by the car we drive.

And it is difficult to ignore that pressure, to swim against the flow of the demands of our environment. But, if we stop and think about how Jesus describes his followers, we know that is what we are called to do.

If we identify with Christ, then we define ourselves in a different way. We are compassionate, generous, careful to judge others, forgiving, ready to go the extra mile with the one who needs our help.

David Lose writes:

And one of the primary reasons Jesus came was to tell us that we are beloved, holy, precious, and honored in God's eyes so that we might also hear ourselves called to lives of love, mercy, compassion, and service. The cross, in other words, was not the vehicle by which Jesus made it possible for God to love us, but rather was God's message through Jesus that we were and are loved all along.

Such a beautiful statement about who we are, and whose we are! If we can really accept that identity of belonging to God; if we can find our self worth in Him, then there is no need to be in competition, right? Either individually, or as a community of faith.

Knowing with confidence, who Jesus calls us to be, takes out the competitive rivalry between us and them. We, as the people of God, are all called to a particular mission in the name of Jesus. None are alike. Think how ineffective our ministries would be if we all were just alike.

That is what Paul tells the church in Corinth when they were arguing over how to be the church and finding themselves in competition. We all have a variety of gifts – individually, we each have different gifts for the benefit of all. As a congregation, we have different abilities and gifts that are not the same as other congregations.

I hear so many good and positive things about you as a church. The very fact that we are small in numbers is something that draws people to us. I have heard new members – when we've talked about growing in numbers – say, "I hope we don't grow too much. I like it small!"

The fact that we are mostly traditional, singing traditional hymns with a few more contemporary songs blended in, is appealing to most who come here.

Our order of worship that is very reflective of who we are as a reformed church – with responsive liturgy – is a draw for many people.

I hear the term “family” when people talk about who we are. And it is so true. You, at Holly Presbyterian Church, are very much a family. And yet, unlike the disciples in this story today, you are also very welcoming to newcomers. That is a great gift that you have.

We are not, and we should not strive to be like someone else. That is, if we are secure in who we are in this particular time and place; if our ministry and mission is about offering a cup of cold water to one of those “little ones” – that is, showing compassion, offering help, extending grace in the name of Jesus – then we are exactly who and where we should be.

Other churches are doing the same. Some are working hard to reach a particular group of people – those who, for whatever reason, have shied away from the church. They are what is called “seeker-oriented.” They are doing different things that will attract those who might never come to a more traditional service.

Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us, is for us. Don’t stop someone from doing acts of power or good deeds in my name.” In other words all followers who are offering grace to others in the name of Jesus, are part of the Body of Christ.

Again, I ask, what are the stumbling blocks you see today, that get in the way of others growing in their faith? What are those obstacles to grace that we – personally or communally – put in the pathway of those little ones that are new to the faith, that might cause them to fall?

Jesus shows great concern for the vulnerable and warns us to be very careful in how we model the Christian life. Rather than judging how authentic others are, Jesus wants us to be about doing the things he has called us to do – acts of prayer and healing, serving and giving in his name. Jesus says we need to be salty and let him determine the saltiness of others.

James tells us we are called to pray, to sing songs of praise, to confess our sins and to pray for one another. We are to use the abilities, the gifts and the influence we might have to be advocates for those who are vulnerable.

We are called to be courageous in working for justice, and compassionate in offering Jesus – the living water – to all who are thirsty and dying for their thirst to be quenched.

Let us prayerfully see any obstacles to grace that we have put in the pathway of others, removing each one with God’s help – obstacles like jealousy, pride, greed, a hunger for power or high esteem, a need to brag, or to put down others.

Instead, let us be God’s vessels for grace, a channel where grace, love, compassion and mercy flow through us to others.

I end this message with a quote I read this week by Alberto Casing.

“When you find yourself in the position to help someone, be happy and feel blessed, because God is answering that persons prayer through you. Remember, our purpose on earth is not to get lost in the dark but to be a light to others, so they may find a way through us. God bless you!”

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Quotes from David Lose, *In the Meantime ...*

<http://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-18-b-who-are-you/>