

Stumbling Blocks and Salt

I take the responsibility of preaching very seriously. There are times when I'm on top of the readings for a season and can draw an outline of where the general theme will go from one end of the season to another.

Not this week. And in fact, not this season.

Since I've been back from Vacation I feel as though my foot has been pressed to the gas pedal in a car. Occasionally it will lift up a bit to slow down, but never really stopping.

Since I got back I've had three funerals. A wedding that was to be at the beginning of October has been postponed. Plans are in the works for a Baptism in mid-October. There's the Blessing of the Animals Service to plan, as well as a Fifth Sunday liturgy on the Saints and our Annual All Soul's Service. This week has been the Elk Valley Pride Festival and it's been amazing and also tiring.

I find when I get tired I tend to not be as kind as when I'm well-rested and refreshed. I don't take care of myself as well as I should when I spread myself too thin. I chose the two readings for today because they irritated me and I was already feeling fairly irritated when I read them. Usually when a reading irritates me, it means I'm supposed to wrestle with it.

Bear with me please.

In James' letter he speaks of prayer being the ultimate "cure all" to whatever ails you. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:13-14, NRSV)

It sounds like a 1950's radio ad for antacid.

"Are any among you suffering? Try Prayer, brought to you by Alka-Seltzer.

"Are any of you cheerful? Sing songs of praise, brought to you by Alka-Seltzer.

"Are any of you sick?" Ask your elders to bring you Alka-Seltzer and you'll be better by morning.

Alka-Seltzer, helping you live your best life, since 1931!

To me, it reads as something quite superficial or even worse, disingenuous. And that kind of false piety angers me.

I heard someone say to a person who was dying of cancer, "If you prayed harder, you would not be dying. It's not the cancer that is killing you, it's your lack of faith in God." Now there are many things wrong with that statement. You can not pray cancer away. Just like you cannot pray the gay away. To tell someone that faith alone can cure them is not helpful. And it's also not true.

Here's the thing. Faith and science are meant to work together. I have known surgeons who have done their best and then asked us, as Chaplains to pray. When my father had open heart surgery, his cardiac surgeon came out of the operating room and said "I've done everything I can do, if you are a person of faith, now is the time to pray."

This section of James' letter smacks of sanctimony to me. And I don't like that. Don't you strut your moral superiority around me!

I will admit that most often I get in my own way worse than anything or anyone else ever would. And when I read passages like this one from James, I feel bad about myself. That my faith isn't strong enough, and frankly, when I use the phrase "cover a multitude of sins" I'm talking about an appropriately loose fitting garment, not the love of God.

Stumbling blocks to faith are ego, self-esteem, sanctimony, and arrogance, to name a few.

I had the delight to meet with a dozen young people from girl guides on Wednesday night during an AMA "Ask Me Anything". They were learning about 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and had some questions, especially about how to "come out" to a conservative family member, or how to tell a person they respect, that a phrase or word they used made them uncomfortable.

I learned much more than I taught and there was some very deep conversation and also some laughter. What I have learned is the future looks bright for people who are outside the heterosexual spectrum. Self-identity seems to be easier than it has ever been. There doesn't seem to be a need for a grand "coming out". Rather, it's having a conversation "I need to share something with you." And that gives me great hope for the future.

In today's Gospel from Mark, we see the disciples of Jesus in their glorious bone-headedness. I'm paraphrasing "Jesus, Dude, this guy was, like, doing an exorcism but he was using your name to do it and we, like, told him to stop because, well, he's not one of us."

Jesus, after the facepalm says, and again, I'm paraphrasing, "Guys, relax. He's doing a good thing. I don't consider him using my name a bad thing, if he's actually doing a good thing. And if the exorcism works, then that's another one for the good guys."

His disciples, bless their hearts, are doing their best. They are following Jesus around, learning about blessing and healing. They are fearful that those who do not proclaim themselves to be followers of Jesus, are imposters, or worse, doing harm in Jesus' name.

What they don't seem to understand is that there is more than one way to express faith. I have a very good friend who is an avowed Atheist. The first time I was asked to preside at an Atheist funeral I called her, in a panic, afraid I would say or do something that would be found offensive. She helped me realise my biases and showed me the roadmap that would help the family of the deceased and not put my beliefs at risk.

She is someone I would consider a genuine follower of Jesus for the way in which she gives so selflessly of herself. And yet, I respect her and her values too much to ever tell her that. I would never want to offend her, as to her a "Christian" is not a good person.

A stumbling block is described as "a circumstance that causes difficulty or hesitation". There are all kinds of stumbling blocks, but the ones that are most prevalent are when we get in our own way. When our pride, or our ego, or our self-esteem prevents us from seeing the folly of our ways.

I think it would be safe to say that being gay, in whatever part of the 2SLGBTQ+ spectrum is not a choice. It is genetic. In the 19th century doctors, believing that sexuality was a choice and to choose a same-gender partner was repugnant, began something which became known as conversion therapy.

Conversion therapy is still in practice today. Mostly it takes place in the pastor's office, or a person's home in which they are humiliated and made to renounce their sexuality as though there is something disturbed and wrong with them. It is degrading, demoralizing and extremely dangerous. It leads to depression, shame, self-hatred and in some cases suicide.

There are conservative pastors who have used today's gospel reading to promote conversion therapy.

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell, And 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, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.” (Mark 9.43-49, NRSV)

Jesus was speaking to his disciples that they should keep their eyes on the divine, they should reach out to the lonely and the forsaken. They should speak up for the voiceless. And if they are getting too caught up in worrying about what others will say or how they will be regarded, they need to remove that stumbling block.

The last part of today's reading is strange “For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” Mark 9.50, NRSV)

Salt is something that makes food taste good. Especially things like french fries. Strong language can sometimes be called salty language. Salt has been used as a preservative. Salt was often used to preserve meat and fish before the invention of refrigeration. Salt is used in pickling to preserve vegetables.

Did you know that salt makes up 0.4% of your body weight and we need 1,500 mgs a day. Jesus tells us to have salt in ourselves and be at peace with one another. He tells us that we must choose words carefully, in order that we don't lessen the worth of another.

If we are not mindful of our words and actions, then we are not living to the fullest we can. If we speak negatively about another, should we tear out our tongue? If we see someone doing something they shouldn't but do not try to stop them, should we take out our eye? Realistically, no.

There is a wonderful phrase by which I try to live. "If you cannot do it in the light, you should not do it in the dark." This phrase is not about sleeping, in case you were wondering. It means if you cannot do something in public, then you likely shouldn't be doing it. If you have to cover up something you want to say or do, you likely shouldn't be doing or saying it.

Live your life, in the light, with salt, and always, always, with love.

Amen.

Sermon for Creation 3

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