STUMBLING BLOCKS
Matthew 16:21-28

Dranesville UMC
Sunday, August 30, 2020

What a difference a week can make! Last week’s Gospel Lesson was the account of Jesus asking the disciples who they and others say he is. The high point of the passage was Simon’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus commended Simon for his response; gave him the name of Peter, meaning “Rock,” and promised to build his church on this rock. In addition, Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom and apparently granted him great authority. From this point on, Jesus is on an irreversible course for Jerusalem and all that awaits him there.

Once it’s out in the open that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised Savior, he begins to tell the disciples what type of Messiah he is. This is where things take a turn for the worse for Peter. In the first of four such predictions in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, where he will suffer many things at the hands of the Jewish leaders, be killed, and then be raised from the dead on the third day.

That must have blown their minds. This does not at all fit with the common ideas of what the Messiah would do when he came. They expected the Messiah to subdue the world, starting with Rome, and rule on God’s behalf from Mount Zion.

There was nothing in contemporary Jewish thought about a suffering Messiah (although it was tucked away in the writings of the prophets, had the scholars looked carefully). The Messiah was expected to inflict suffering and death on Israel’s enemies and on the wicked within Israel, not experience it himself. The idea of Jesus suffering to save others was a tough concept to convey - it still is. The Apostle Paul referred to the cross as foolishness to Greeks (Gentiles) and a real stumbling block to Jews.

Most of us have been taught about the cross and resurrection of Jesus for so long that the concept loses its shock effect. Let’s try to find something in our contemporary context that might help to show how unsettling this idea was.
Since our presidential race is starting to really heat up, let’s try to draw a parallel to that. Imagine, if you will, that you’ve been asked to be the campaign manager for a popular, charismatic candidate who seems to be the overwhelming favorite to win the election. He has been promoting a platform of reform which promises to right many of society’s wrongs. It seems that the masses are solidly behind him; but he has alienated many of the career politicians who have been in office for so long they have forgotten all the ideals they first had when they came to Washington. This could be a big political stepping stone for you as you ride the candidate’s coattails into the White House. Here’s the twist. When the candidate is spelling out your duties, he tells you something on the order of, “Together we can accomplish a great deal. There are many things you will be able to do on my behalf - after I’m gone. You see, my Presidency, and all the accompanying changes, will begin with my assassination on Inauguration Day.” How do you respond to something like that?

Peter, probably with the best of intentions, takes Jesus aside to speak to him. Matthew tells us Peter “began to rebuke him.” Peter essentially said, “No way, Lord! God would never let that happen to you!”

That was a big mistake. Remember that Peter is a disciple of Jesus, certainly not a peer. He may have been praised and given special recognition earlier, but he is still a subordinate. In that culture, a disciple was not expected to question a teacher’s instruction or actions. To criticize one’s teacher was absolutely prohibited.

Jesus gave Peter both barrels. “Get behind me, Satan!” The one who is the rock on whom the Church will be built is now being called Satan. Has Peter lost his favored status to the point that he will be unable to recover? Not exactly. There is a lot of meaning in Jesus’ outburst.

Telling Peter to get behind him is Jesus’ way of emphatically reminding Peter that he is still a disciple. A disciple’s place is behind or following his teacher; not confronting him face-to-face. Peter is being told that he has become a little too big for his britches.

In fairness to Peter, he probably thought Jesus was about to ruin a perfectly good ministry by getting himself killed. He seems to be saying, “Lord, think of all the
people you’ll be letting down.” Jesus was thinking of all the people he would be lifting up - the multitudes that would be made right with God through this depressing and confusing step that seemed so wrong to Peter.

Likening Peter to Satan sounds pretty harsh. There is a backstory here. In Matthew 4, Jesus undergoes temptation by Satan before starting his ministry. One of the temptations which Satan offered was to rule the world without having to go to the cross. The catch is that Jesus would owe allegiance to Satan. The upside is that Jesus would get a crown without the need for the cross. Avoiding one of the most hideous forms of torture and death would be a huge temptation. In the end, Jesus knew he couldn’t do that. It might allow him to avoid a lot of suffering; but it would also mean that Jesus would not die for you, me and the rest of the world. That would leave us all lost in our sin with no way to atone for them. Dying on the cross was Jesus’ true mission. He couldn’t abandon that; no matter how horrible it might be.

When Jesus refused Satan’s offer, using the words, “Get behind me, Satan!” the Gospel of Luke’s account tells us that Satan left Jesus to await a more opportune time. Now, Jesus is hearing the same temptation, to have a crown without a cross, being lifted up by one of his own disciples. Figuratively or literally, Peter appears to be a surrogate of Satan. Jesus has to firmly quash this idea.

Jesus told Peter he was a stumbling block; a hindrance to Jesus’ mission. The imagery has changed. Peter has gone from being a rock, a foundation stone, to a stumbling block, a hindrance or obstacle. The Greek word translated as “stumbling block,” is skandalon, which is the root of the English word “scandal.” I am constantly asking myself how I might unknowingly be a stumbling block to the cause of Christ. How many times do I make something about me rather than him?

The fact that Peter could be both “rock” and “stumbling block,” applies to us as well. We all seem to have two natures - good and bad. Martin Luther described believers as simul justus et peccator - at the same time, both righteous and a sinner. The challenge for each of us is to allow Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to refine us; to increase the righteousness while purging us of the urge to sin.
Jesus was not about to use his ministry for personal gain. He would achieve glory, and bring glory to God the Father, only by suffering on the cross. He sets an example for his followers. In the next few verses, Jesus makes it clear that he expects his followers to deny themselves - to abandon their perceived “right” to self-determination; to bear their crosses - to surrender their lives in order to fulfill their calling to discipleship; and to follow him, wherever that may take them.

Disciples are called to lose their lives for Christ rather than try to save them for themselves. Saving one’s life might mean failing to confront injustice and settling for comfort and self-interest.

This can certainly occur at the congregational level. Imagine a congregation that sings only upbeat songs and hymns and omits any that speak of the challenges of a life of faith. They took out “Forgive us our trespasses (or sins)” from The Lord’s Prayer because people don’t like to feel guilty. They don’t like the word “worship” because it has to do with fear and awe. They prefer “celebration” instead. The Prayer of Confession was renamed to “Naming our Pain.”

What I just described may not sound like anything you or I have experienced. I can tell you that I went through the Academy for Spiritual Formation with a man who pastors a megachurch in another state that, from his description, almost exactly fits the template I just laid out. They also have problems with Jesus’ virgin birth, physical resurrection and many other foundational concepts of Christianity. I won’t go into greater detail except to say that I had trouble figuring out what was distinctly Christian about this congregation. They fail to recognize that faith can be uplifting and rewarding AND be inconvenient and uncomfortable.

On a more humorous side, imagine a billboard for “The Lite Church.” It reads: “24% fewer commitments, 10-minute sermons, 45-minute worship services and only 8 commandments. Everything you always wanted in a church - and less.”

That’s not what following Jesus is all about. Little in life has value if it costs nothing. Few victories are won when there is no struggle or battle. Character is realized when we meet and overcome temptations - not when there is no hard decision to make.
Jesus doesn’t water down the cost of discipleship. You may have heard this before; but it bears retelling. Only one of the original Twelve Apostles died a natural death. Some 40% of the New Testament was written from prison.

It’s been said that we’re losing Christianity because Christianity is a religion for heroes and we’re just good-natured people who want to be left alone and have a good time.

A little girl came home from Sunday school and complained, “Jesus told us to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations; but we just sat at the table.”

When we come to the cross, we die to self. We release pride and our selfish dreams and desires. We receive power and a new and lasting hope. We’re renewed. We discover that the yoke really is easy and the burden light.

After a while, we may start to feel a little too self-sufficient. That’s when we need to return to the cross. Once again, we will gain power and peace. This is an ongoing, iterative process.

There is a term in aviation known as V1. That is the point of no return when an airplane is hurtling down the runway and must takeoff. Up until that point, the flight may be aborted. The speed for V1 is determined by a number of factors including temperature, air pressure, wind speed and weight of the aircraft.

When we put our faith in Christ, that’s our V1. Like that pilot, we need to apply full throttle and takeoff.

During this pandemic, many of us have found new ways to serve which involve giving of our time and money. Some of these forms of giving are familiar while others may stretch us. In his book, Money, Sex and Power, Richard J. Foster writes about giving money in service to God. His words could apply to our time just as well. Foster writes:

“When we give, we are releasing a little more of our egocentric selves and a little more of our false security...

“Giving frees us to care. It produces an air of expectancy as we anticipate what God will lead us to give. It makes life with God an adventure of discovery. We’re
being used to help make a difference in the world, and that’s worth living for and giving for.”

If we are intentional in living out our faith, if we constantly examine our actions and our motives, we will find ourselves in line with God’s will and not be stumbling blocks to Jesus’ ministry in the world.

Let me close by quoting at length, Tom Long, a prominent theologian and teacher of preachers at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. Long writes: “Most cross bearers do not literally pay the price with their own blood. Unlike Jesus, most of his followers are not actually killed for their faithful obedience to God; but it should not be forgotten that some are. Most Christians carry crosses of quiet self-sacrifice and compassionate service to the needs of others; but in every period of history there have always been Christians for whom ‘losing their life for Christ’s sake’ is more than a figure of speech.

“So, from the vantage point of the world, nothing could be more self-defeating, foolish, and wasteful than laying down one’s personal agenda and picking up a cross - the crude, cruel instrument of suffering and loss. When the curtain of the kingdom is drawn back, however, another picture is revealed. Bearing a cross may look to the world like a tragedy, but in God’s eyes it is a triumph. Suffering on behalf of others may appear to be pouring one’s life down the bottomless drain of human need, but in the kingdom it is what it means to save one’s life. It is the mystery of the gospel that what appears to crush everything one hopes to be as a human being - bearing the cross of service and suffering - is in fact the only way for a human being to be fully alive.

“Despite its ominous sound, Jesus’ word that, when the Son of Man comes in glory, ‘he will reward everyone for what has been done’ is a promise, not a threat. It is a word of assurance to Jesus’ followers that, although the cross may look insignificant and foolish to the world, bearing a cross in the kingdom of heaven, counts to God. A life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing bread with the hungry, visiting those in prison, and denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in the economy of a self-centered age, but in the storehouse of heaven, it is a lavish treasure.” Amen.