

Text: Ja50mes 5: 13-20; Mark 9:38-

Title: Stumbling blocks

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There are some things in this world that I will never understand. This is not too surprising- for there are this is the normal course of events. For instance, I will never understand the relationship between women and shopping for shoes- and I don't want to know. Then there is intuition- some have , some don't- no explanation possible. What I really don't get are preachers who scold those who only come to church on Christmas and Easter- on Christmas and Easter? You think that is going to help? You would think that the birth/resurrection of Jesus would be more than enough to preach on.....

All kidding aside there are times when we struggle with obstacles, those man made attitudes that stand in the way of our experiencing the church the way that God wants us to experience the body of Christ. Some are obvious. When I was a kid one was expected to dress up for church. I could understand the wanting to present the best for God- but when that morphed into, you have to be good enough to worship with us- or even worse, I am unworthy to worship- something had to give. These man made obstacles not only stand in our way of experiencing worship amid the Body of Christ, they blind our eyes to the central surprise of the Gospel- that the church is for failures like us, that righteousness based on our own goodness and worthiness simply does not exist- but I am getting ahead of myself.....

The Mark passage amazes me- for the life of me I can't figure why it is in there- except that it illustrates on of our most basic stumbling blocks-1) the temptation we have to "corner the market" to think that the way we do something is the only right way, and therefore we are suspicious of all the rest. The story is simple enough- some guy is exorcizing demons in Jesus name who is not associated with the disciples- and they are torqued! This episode is very similar to one in Numbers 11 when "non-official" prophets start prophesying- and even Joshua wants Moses to stop them- Moses replied that he wished that the Spirit of God would fall on ALL of the people! Jesus' response is essentially the same. If someone is casing out demons in my name- and it works- back off and get out of the way!

We want to set up turf- and we protect it. That is why that after almost 50 years of the ecumenical movement that you see so little interdenominational cooperation. We've learned how to respect- but honest to God partnership in ministry? That's rare! We Presbyterians, after spending close to 40 years and millions of dollars trying to form an overall denomination that included all the mainline denominations, walked out when the Episcopal church insisted that we get rid of elders and had all of our ministers re-ordained by Episcopal bishops. Rather than obeying Christ's commands to get on with the work of ministry, we spent all sorts of time arguing over who get to do what whose way! And we still do!

That's the second part of the obstacle- we want to set up controls over the Holy Spirit. Whose church is this? You've heard the old joke- a Pentecostal guy moves into a small town and the only church is Presbyterian. After a fw well placed "Amen!s" and "Alleluia!s" one of the elders sidles up to him and says, "Sir, you have to be quiet, you are disturbing the service." To which he replies, I can't help it, I've got the Spirit in me!" "Well you didn't get it here!" Painful isn't it?

Actually, a better would be scandalous. The Greek ***skandalizu*** (where we get scandalized) is translated here as "cause to stumble." We unconsciously divide the world up into people like US and people like THEM. People like US are the good guys, and people like THEM are not to be trusted. Look around you- chances are that we all pretty much look the same- same demographic, education and economic status. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, but when fail to recognize or welcome those who do not look or sound like us- we place a dent in their faith. For that is what ***skandalizu*** does, it erodes and eventually destroys faith. That's too high a price to pay for having one's druthers.

Skandalizu works both ways. Jesus may use extremes to make a point (like cutting off a hand or plucking out an eye, but James is more down to earth. James understands that there are different kinds of obstacles we place in our own way. James understands that sickness is in no way related to sin- but he does understand that shame is corrosive on our faith. Shame is weird- guilt is when we feel bad about something that we've done, but shame is when we feel bad for something we are. And for many, sickness is very, very isolating.

Every pastor I know (including myself) has had some version of the following request, “pastor, please pray for my husband/wife/son/daughter because they have XYZ disease. And whatever you do, please don’t mention it in the church or to anyone, because they would be mortified...” and of course we honor that because 1) prayer is always good and 2) if you can’t trust a pastor to keep a confidence, who can you trust? Sometimes it’s not a sickness- sometimes it’s losing a house, losing a business, losing a marriage. It doesn’t matter, it all boils down to the same thing, the fear that we might be seen, not as US but as THEM and somehow unclean. It just breaks my heart.

I have seen few exceptions to this. One was Fred. Fred was a judge- the kind that heard, not criminal cases, but child custody cases, divorce, that sort of thing. He was falsely accused of sexual harassment. Somehow he got the nerve to ask for prayer that Sunday. We did exactly what James told us to do- the elders of the church gathered round, laid hands on him and prayed. I’ve got to tell you, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that the Holy Spirit was there that day. Of course we all knew that the accusations were false- Fred was beyond squeaky clean- but he had to undergo an investigation anyway. He later told us that that experience in the church gave him the strength to get through.

I think the real obstacle that we lay upon ourselves and others is the notion that you have to be good enough, our version of being ritually clean, in order to worship here. and if we somehow don’t measure up, then we have better hide that reality as best we can. It gets back to that US/THEM thing again.

Everyplace else in our lives we experience conditional acceptance and conditional approval. Don’t wreck your car and the insurance company likes you. wreck your car, or someone else’s’ and your rates are going to go up! (no that doesn’t mean that the insurance company likes you even more...) Do your job and you will get paid, maybe even a promotion. Don’t do your job and you won’t get paid- and you may lose your job as well. pick a fight with your wife/husband and it doesn’t mean that you will not be loved, but life may be less than pleasant for a while. You get the idea. Normal life.

And because that is normal like, we unconsciously bring those attitudes over into the church. Bu the Church does not work that way. Just the opposite. To join the church you first have to admit that you are a failure, a sinner. Not just once, but all the time!

Just today we admitted to God that we failed in faith, that we remain captive to doubt and fear and that we do not trust in Christ's power. We say these words, not because we like admitting that we are failures, we say them, for in acknowledging that we are sinners we are free to appreciate God's overwhelming love and grace in Jesus Christ.

Bottom line- we place obstacles up to worship to hide behind.(like that is going to work....) For we are afraid that if God sees us as we really are then He will realize that we are not worth redemption. the funny thing is- we are right- we are not worth redemption. it is only God's redemption that makes us worth anything!

So let us repent, ask God to show us the obstacles that we might be hiding behind and dare God to show us ourselves as HE sees us, as beloved children, those we is recreating from the inside out so that we may be used to spread the good news of His grace and to be a blessing to those who need God's blessing. Let us join with the words of Be Thou My Vision- and live our lives accordingly.