

“Stumbling” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
September 27, 2009 – Proper 21B

What?!? What?!? Did you listen to that gospel lesson I just read? “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. . .If your foot causes you to stumble cut it off. . .If your eyes causes you to stumble tear it out!! For it is better for you to enter the kingdom of heaven with one arm or one leg or one eye than to have it all and go to hell.” Wow. Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus so extremely graphic about the wages of sin or about anything else for that matter. I was kicking myself this week that I hadn’t given Henry this Sunday to preach. He got that wonderful passage about welcoming the children and this week is almost more like some pre-Halloween ad for one of those very visually gruesome scary movies than it is a proclamation of the gospel good news. But here it is right in front of us from the gospel of Mark, “Better you should hang a rock around your neck and jump into the sea,” Jesus he says, “than walk around like nothing is wrong and then end up in hell, where (just in case you needed more visuals) the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. So what do we do with this other than my saying, “The gospel of the Lord” and you dutifully responding, “Praise to you Lord Christ.”

Well, first, if nothing else this passage defines in a very obvious way the limits of literalism. These verses provide one of the best arguments against a literal reading of Scripture you can find, so tuck ’m away for the conversations you run into that follow along those lines. My guess is that if you walked into even the most Biblically literal-believing church you would not find anyone who had strictly, completely, literally followed this passage. Presents another interesting image in itself, doesn’t it? So this passage has going for it that it can make a critical reader of anyone. Not critical in the sense of criticizing, but critical in the sense of demanding that we bring our minds to this passage, and ask questions of this passage. Questions like “To whom is Jesus talking?” and “What was he really trying to say?” And “Why did he say it at all?”

And so, we’ll do that. Critically speaking, in terms of context, these are Jesus last words at home. When he’s finished he’ll travel south from Galilee into Judea, and he’ll die in Jerusalem. And this speech before he walks that road is part of his instructions to his disciples – it started several verses back – in the gospel passage we heard last week (that Henry got to preach on!) – when Jesus said that disciples had to let go of arguing around who was first and who was last and focus on welcoming the children, the little ones. In this passage then again, he’s telling them what’s good for them. “It would be better for you,” he says four times, describing several awful things that would be better for them than to cause a little one to stumble or to stumble themselves. Better they should cripple themselves than to do that, he warns them. Better that they should limp and grope their way into heaven than to be thrown whole and healthy into hell.

So maybe Jesus is simply trying to get across to the disciples the importance of their actions. Following him is no casual thing and he’s not wanting to be unclear about that. It’s a life or death decision that is about to get very dangerous for everyone involved – not only because of what others may do to them (he emphasizes that very little,) it’s risky because of what they might do to themselves. As disciples they can’t take time off. They slough off and tell jokes about the Gentiles or harass a Samaritan. They can’t step away for a breather and ignore the meek or the poor or the peacemakers. According to this passage everything they do has consequences. Everything they say counts. This passage lays it out quite clearly -- they are either part of the good news or they’re bad news; and they don’t have the option of being

insignificant. It's intense but maybe sometimes in order to get a point across, it has to be. Their lives matter. Their words matter. Barbara Brown Taylor says it like this, "The disciples are full of unrealized power, and Jesus is begging them (quite dramatically) to wake up to that power and use it wisely or they'll cause themselves and others to fall."

Which makes me wonder what it means to stumble. How do we do it? How do we cause others to do it? I came up with a little list this week which could have been a much longer list but I thought a little list might be a good place for us to start. You can expand on it and tend to it as you go from here today. We stumble when we talk about how we are all God's children and then treat some of those children as if we're not related at all, as if they're orphans and we're not connected in any way – justifying our lack of attention and love and care. There are endless examples of this in our world today. We stumble when we talk about and celebrate God's gifts to us and then we hoard those gifts, refusing to share or being too afraid to offer those gifts, to offer ourselves. I fall into that trap occasionally, any of you? We stumble when we talk about and pray for God's grace, God's amazing Grace and then don't allow that grace to touch our own hurts or grief or losses or needs; we keep up a wall in the name of self-protection that actually becomes a barrier to our own wholeness and healing.

And people who know us notice these things. They trip over them, and so do we and so those are the things we need to let go of, the dimensions of ourselves and our actions that we need to cut off our tear out of our lives. And that's not easy work and it can feel at the time like we are losing a limb but actually by doing that work we are gaining our lives, new lives and that has a ripple effect, offering new life to others too. Jesus has offered an alternative that is good news. If we want to be whole, we can use our eyes to see the world and our neighbors as God sees them, and we can use our good feet to carry us toward one another and into service, and we can stretch out our good arms to someone in danger of stumbling, so that God can steady and save us all.

Amen.