



THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

OCTOBER 4, 2020

MATTHEW 21: 33-42

"WHEN WE STUMBLE AND FALL"

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So, they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?"

"Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.



SERMON

We recently completely renovated a building in Millvale that serves as both a residence and a business for our daughter, Alayna. She hopes to open her vintage clothing store, vintage 416, during Halloween week.

I don't remember why, but I went to the building one evening and, because I wasn't familiar with the exterior layout, I stumbled over a low concrete curb and fell flat on my face.

I hurt my shoulder, an elbow, knees, and my pride. I've never been extremely coordinated, so it was just one more in a long list of stumbles, trips, falls, and tumbles.

If I reflect on this latest stumble, I could say:

I was walking around in the dark

I didn't watch where I was going

And the stumble caused me to slow down and look around

When we stumble, likely most of us get angry with ourselves. We utter a few choice words, call ourselves stupid, idiot, or loser, feel ashamed for a period of time, question "what's wrong with me?" And then move on.

But there might be a different way to look at our stumbles.

The prophet Isaiah remarks that God is both our sanctuary and our stumbling stone.

That God is love. That God is compassionate. That God wants the best for us. That God is our safe place. God as sanctuary.

But what about God as our stumbling stone?

This may be a bit hard to figure out.

Think of Jacob in the old testament. He wrestles with an angel of God, is wounded in the process, and places a stone at that spot to mark it as a holy place. The stumbling stone is sacred.

And then Jacob carries his wound for a lifetime as a reminder of God's stony presence.

This is the paradox of God. The full experience of God includes God as the stone that brings us down. God as the trap that catches us. God as the God who wounds, as well as heals.



Bringing us down, trapping us, wounding us, not out of malice, but in order to ultimately heal us....

Recall that when I stumbled, I was in the dark.

There's an apt metaphor. We trip when we're stumbling around in the dark. One of the images in the new testament is that we are asleep. We are sleepwalking. And so we're going to bump into the dresser, trip over the dog, hit our head on the door frame.

Because we need to wake up.

In our gospel story, the Greek word for stumbling block is Skandalon, from which we get the English word scandal.

Jesus refers to our various tumbles, stumbles, and falls as scandals. We are exposed. We have the opportunity to see where we were going and assess whether we were heading in the right direction.

Let me bring a bit of depth psychology into our reflection.

In ancient times, the Greek God, Hermes, was considered the psychological energy governing boundaries and life transitions.

When a traveler came to a crossroads, he or she would find a stack of stones, called a herm. He traveler would stop and sink into this Hermes energy in order to choose the right path. Think of the pandemic as a stumbling stone. A Skandalon.

We are stumbling around in the dark. This is one of the reasons that guidelines from the experts shift and change. This is confusing and bothersome.

We are used to being in control. We are accustomed to thinking we know where we are going.

But like me stumbling in the dark around an unfamiliar building, we are tripping up.

Let's have a little grace. Rather than criticizing the experts, who are the best we have to offer in a Skandalon, let's respect the best minds, recognize we're all in the dark, and cut them a break.

Perhaps we need to acknowledge that this is a time of stumbling and that we are uncomfortable with it....



We are going to re-launch worship next Thursday and Sunday. Now some churches have already opened. Some have opened, closed again, and re-opened.

We are re-launching later than some congregations.

There is no right way.

We are in the dark.

We are doing the best we can.

We will keep our sanctuary safe and disinfected. We have the latest disinfecting technology. Paul bell, who oversees all the cleaning and disinfecting at Heinz hall guides us in best practices....

When it comes to our contemporary service, we were able to step back and re-think it. And we had the time to consider that maybe Thursday would work better.

You can come to worship on Thursday and have your weekend free.

If you are going to be gone on the weekend, you can still come to worship on Thursday.

Again, the pandemic tripped us up, forced us to look around.

And, looking up from a new vantage point, we began to see that there are hungry people all around us. There are people who daily struggle to keep food on the table. They had been hidden from us. And maybe we didn't want to see them.

But now we do. And we are being church in the best way possible. We are serving. We are caring. We stood at the crossroads and followed a path laid out by the spirit.

And all kinds of people have joined with us. Members, non-members, people who don't want to be members. That's not important. We have joined hands with a school system, a rotary club, non-Lutheran congregations, people throughout the country, it doesn't matter. Some would consider it a scandal. It's not how we do things! We are just people with good hearts giving to hurting human beings in need....

I think one of the best things to come out of this pandemic is that people are re-evaluating their priorities. The pandemic has caused us to slow down and look around.

I hear from people that they like being home. They are investing in their homes.



Rather than racing around from pillar to post, rather than buying into the manic American lifestyle, they have found meaning, comfort, a deeper sense of family from being home.

I slowed down and cared for our flower garden. I slowed down and marveled at the variety of bees, butterflies and birds who have come around this year. I have had the time to care for what we planted.

From three tomato plants, I made homemade spaghetti sauce, marinara sauce, pizza sauce, and bruschetta toppings, all waiting to be used this winter.

Deb and I were able to slow down and really pay attention to Lucas, our fifteen-year-old bichon, as he stumbled through his last days. We were able to pay attention to him, watch, and come to the painful decision to put him down.

I think there has been more time to grieve the loss of our good boy.

In stumbling over this huge pandemic stone, we all have been offered the opportunity to slow down, to really see, perhaps to simplify and adjust our priorities.

These are good things. These are godly things.

We continue to stand before the pile of stones at the crossroads, discerning the choice of paths before us....

Too often, for my taste, religious communities have held up and worshipped a God of the good times. God as the bestower of blessings, God as the great fixer-upper of our problems. Even worse, the God who supposedly wants us to be healthy, wealthy, and successful.

I prefer the biblical revelation of the God of the Scandalon. The God of the stumbling stone.

The God who trips us up and causes us to fall.

So that we get out of our heads and have to look around us.

So that we have to slow down and re-think our life.

So that we get out of our small, little life, and see the lives of all the people around us.

So that we stop stumbling around in the dark like some drunken sailor and adjust our priorities.



That we might stand at the crossroads and know that the God of the tough times is at our side.

When Jacob awoke from his dream of the angels climbing to heaven; when Jacob lifted his head from the stone he had used as his pillow; he said of God, “you were here all along and I never knew it.”

That’s why we need the stumbling stone.

SERMON SONG

Till We Get the Healing Done (Van Morrison)