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### ***“Stumbling Blocks”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 30, 2020  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

#### **Matthew 16: 21-28**

##### *Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection*

<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

##### *The Cross and Self-Denial*

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

<sup>27</sup> “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of [the Creator], and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

#### **Romans 12: 9-21**

##### *Marks of the True Christian*

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;<sup>[b]</sup> do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;<sup>[c]</sup> for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” <sup>20</sup> No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to

drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

#### Footnotes

- a. Romans 12:11 Other ancient authorities read *serve the opportune time*
- b. Romans 12:16 Or *give yourselves to humble tasks*
- c. Romans 12:19 Gk *the wrath*

### Sermon

#### Setting Your Mind

A while back and at 30,000 feet above the earth,  
an attendant on a full flight could not get a rowdy passenger to behave.  
He was behaving, all right; just not in a way that fostered community and good will.  
She suspected that he had had one too many alcoholic drinks  
at the airport bar before boarding the plane.  
At her wits end, she stood beside him. *“Please, sir, keep your voice down.  
Are you aware that the Rev. Billy Graham is sitting right behind you?”*  
*“Really?”* He turned to look over his shoulder.  
*“Rev. Graham, I went to one of your crusades and it changed my life!”*

One of Rev. Billy Graham’s inherent tenets was  
if you want to make the world better,  
the best way, the communal way, God’s Way,  
was to make better people.  
Better people make the world around them better.  
That’s the theory.  
There is substantial evidence to back it up.

Throughout his life Billy Graham invited people like us, from all walks of life,  
to make a promise, a covenant, a commitment to surrender ourselves to God.  
Graham sat down with pastors and paupers, princes and presidents.  
He called us to dedicate to God  
our whole selves, heart, mind, body and soul.  
Jesus Christ was all about this. He was all over this, for Himself and for you and me.

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples  
that he must go to Jerusalem  
and undergo great suffering  
at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes,  
and be killed, and on the third day be raised.  
And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him,  
saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”*

*But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter,  
“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me;  
for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

There are all kinds of stumbling blocks,  
stumbling blocks that may inhibit our setting our minds on God’s way.

**This morning let’s home in on what it means to set our minds on God’s Way.**

Our Gospel lesson for today comes from Matthew.  
Biblical scholars teach us that Matthew learned this story from Mark.  
Mark’s Gospel was written closest to the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth.  
Listen to Mark 8:33b, a biblical passage that has been handed down  
from the original Aramaic, converted into Greek,  
then translated into every modern language.

*“For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*  
--New Revised Standard Version

*“Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of [humanity].”*  
--King James Version

*“For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of [humanity].”*  
—Modern English Version

*“You are thinking not as God thinks, but as human beings do.”*  
--New Jerusalem Bible

And the remarkably plain-spoken let’s-cut-to-the-chase message from The Message:  
*“You have no idea how God works.”*

There is a great deal of truth in that last statement.  
We really have no idea how God works.  
Here is to the Mystery, the Magic, the Might of the Holy, the Wondrous I AM.  
Here is to be accepting that there are moments and meanings and miracles  
beyond the comprehension of anyone’s mind.  
The seemingly impossible may be made possible  
by a loving, forgiving, transforming God  
who will not be filed away for safekeeping or for later use,  
or relegated to our side of the playing field,  
or put into a box labeled Our Understanding.

Then again, maybe we do.  
Have an idea of how God works.  
Jesus told us so.

This I know.  
For the Bible....

The Gospel of Mark can be divided almost right down the middle.  
The first 8 of its 16 chapters present the Ministry of Jesus.  
As soon as Jesus rose out of the baptismal waters then He is led into the wilderness.  
There He wrestles with his call, his vocation, his choice of weapons:

Does He use his power as a weapon, to dominate, control, put his own self first?  
Or does He surrender?

Accept the mantle to serve, surrender, sacrifice, suffer?  
Draw deep upon the power of love as his only weapon?

Should I stay or should I go...with God?  
Jesus sets his mind to walk in the Light.

He walks on water, moving from the riverside to his astonished disciples.

He raises a little girl from the dead to new life.

He calms a storm, saying, *"Peace! Be still."*

In Bethsaida, He cures a man of his blindness.

Well, sort of.

Jesus put his hands on the man and says, *"Can you see anything?"*

*"Oh, I can see people, but they look like trees walking."*

*"Hmmm, let's try that again."*

Jesus puts His hands on him a second time.

Sight is restored; the man sees everything clearly.

Phew.

Time to move on.

The second half of Mark's Gospel, also 8 chapters,  
beginning at 8:27 tells the story of suffering, sacrifice, and salvation.

His suffering: His sacrifice; Our salvation, through the Son of God.

Jesus informs His disciples that the Sanhedrin are after Him,

and that He is on his way to Jerusalem

where He will be arrested, suffer, and be killed,

and afterward, in three days, He will rise.

Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him.

Peter had a sure and long-held expectation of a messiah.

However, the idea of a Messiah who was about to pick up a cross

and then ask Peter to follow in His ways of justice and mercy and compassion,

well, as far as Peter was concerned,  
that was not going to cut it.  
Jesus spoke directly to Peter,  
rebuking him right back. *"Get behind me, Satan!  
For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*  
The first step to following the Ways of God  
is to set your mind on divine things.  
Back in the wilderness, Jesus made up His mind, made his choice,  
defined what kind of Messiah He was,  
and now, in our wildernesses and wanderings and wonderings,  
it's our turn to choose this day whom we will serve.  
And how. And why.

### ***Setting Your Mind***

Let's be honest.  
We know the expected answer about setting our minds on God's Way.  
but what is the real answer?  
Reminds me of the story of the preacher doing a children's sermon.  
Preacher asks, *"What is grey, climbs trees, collects acorns, and has a bushy tail?"*  
A child says, *"Well, I know the answer is supposed to be Jesus,  
but it sounds like a squirrel to me."*  
I know the answer is supposed to be to simply set our minds on Jesus,  
but it sounds hard to me.

### ***Setting Your Mind***

Our emotions, choices, and actions begin in the same place: our brains.  
In our church we like to say,  
*"Don't check your brain at the door."*  
The brain is an organ, an organ of emotion and behavior.  
We are wired naturally and spiritually.  
We are wired to be accountable to each other,  
to protect our tribe,  
to procreate and continue the species,  
and to thoroughly enjoy the basics of life  
so that we may live to see another dawn, another day.  
Therefore, it feels good to get a good night's sleep,  
eat delicious and nutritious foods,  
drink refreshing beverages,  
enjoy the erotic romance of a healthy relationship,  
find safe shelter from the storms and elements.  
Good deeds do not go unrewarded.  
Inside our brains are neurotransmitters called dopamine.

Dopamine is a chemical released by neurons--nerve cells—  
to send signals to other nerve cells.

The brain includes several distinct dopamine pathways,  
one of which plays a major role in reward-motivated behavior.

Each time we behave in a certain way for which we should be rewarded,  
dopamine is released.

Good behavior is rewarded by making us feel good.

Good sleep, food, rest, shelter, and sex are rewarded by the release of dopamine.

Our brains inform us it that feels good to do what it takes  
for humanity to survive and thrive.

Furthermore, our brains affirm that when we recognize a Higher Power,  
--whether we name this creator God, Yahweh, Allah--  
that we grow calmer.

We feel more secure.

We like other people and ourselves more.

We deepen our connections with the Holy, the community, our selves.

We heal faster.

We embody self-esteem and self-confidence.

We care about neighbors seen and unseen.

We generate empathy and compassion for tribes near and far away.

The One Who Created and Creates wired us naturally and spiritually to know God.

Whether you are a Bible thumper or a hard-core atheist,  
when you feel really good,  
you will call on the name the Lord and give praise.

*“God, that was good.”*

### ***Setting Your Mind***

*“For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Sometimes we set our minds on human things,  
forgetting the divinity in us and around us

Sometimes we grow disoriented or disconnect from divine priorities.

Our capacity for free will opens the door to the possibility  
we will choose that which is not God’s Way.

See if any of these human things we set our minds on sound familiar,  
like the kind of things that have disconnected you or me from God’s Way:

Greed.

Vainglory.

Fear.

Self-Righteousness.

Abuse of Power.

Entitlement.

Intolerance.

Speaking as a recovering addict, I can add to the list and testify  
that folks like me

have been led astray by addictions and addictive behaviors.

Addiction is a learned behavior.

It takes practice.

Repetition.

Means.

Access.

Sometimes encouragement from others.

Abuse, misuse and overuse of alcohol, drugs, opioids, comfort foods,  
social media and screens, to name a few,

hook into the feel-good sensation area of our brains,  
releasing dopamine transmitters,

telling our brains, telling us  
that this is so good

that it beats out everything else, takes over,  
demands complete and utter allegiance.

*Are you surprised social media and screens made the Top Ten List, or did you expect that?*

The average world citizen spends 10 hours a day staring at a screen

—television, cell phones, iPads, computers—

and 5 of those 10 hours are spent using/looking at a cell phone.

An article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution

spoke about a challenge faced by Buddhist monasteries.

Many young monks have grown addicted to video games,

playing for so many hours a day they have grown

to care more for their fantasy world than the real one.

No finger pointing here; I have multiple Madden Football trophies.

Addictions intermesh with free will, choices, emotions, pain tolerance.

Addictions lower our tolerance for pain,

constantly reminding us that we hurt,

that we need to take something, pop something, smoke something,  
eat or drink or watch or do something

to lessen our degree of pain.

America's highways, byways and alleyways

are strewn with children of God

who had medical procedures, were prescribed opioids, got hooked,

chased dragons, decimated their relationships with loved ones,

and are drowning in the whirlpool of drug addiction.

There is hope.

Stumbling blocks are only that: blocks that can be addressed.

The Good News is God made our brains neuro-plastic.  
The brain can reorient and rewire, adapt and adopt new behaviors.  
A report on National Public Radio told  
    how a few emergency room doctors  
        are offering alternatives to opioids,  
            like teaching patients to manage their pain,  
                to increase their tolerance,  
    rather than prescribing more or different meds  
        to which patients may grow dependent.

There is hope.

Peter is not defined or denied restoration by Jesus despite his remonstrations.  
Thanks be to God, Jesus shows us daily that our past does not determine our future.  
There is release, restoration, rebirth,  
    setting and resetting of our minds.

### ***Setting Your Mind***

*"For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

Betty and I named our GPS *Use-Eh-Less*.

Because that is what she is: Useless.

She waits until too late to say turn left or right.

She directs us off freeways to access roads then back onto the freeway.

She's constantly recalculating.

What if our GPS told us to recalculate, to recalculate our mind?

We have a GPS—God's People Saver—who reorients us,  
    calling us to repent and turn toward God.

When it comes to resetting our minds on divine things, on the Holy,  
    best first move is to surrender.

Surrender.

Say to yourself, say to God, say to someone else,

*"I cannot fix this by myself. I need help. I need God's help."*

You see, the Good News is that our Creator wired us naturally and spiritually.

God is already inside our heads, our hearts, body and soul.

The presence of God is already here.

There.

Everywhere.

Within you.

Without you. (*A nod to George Harrison*)

Best second move is to give thanks that God sends guides to show us the Way.

We are not fooling anyone with our delays, divisive, or disruptive behavior.

Denial is not a river in Egypt.

You and I are more transparent than we think or believe or imagine.

As they say here in the South, *"Love is blind, but the neighbors aren't."*



Sinners like us are blind.  
Addicts like us are blind.  
We greedy folk and fearful folk and self-righteous folk are blind.  
*"I once was blind, but now I see..."*  
We're blind to ourselves, our realities, our strengths and growing edges,  
but the neighbors aren't.

Jesus puts His hands on you and says, *"Can you see anything?"*  
We say, *"Oh, I can see people, but they look like trees walking."*  
*"Hmmm, let's try that again,"* says Jesus.  
Jesus heals us again and again.  
Sight and sensibility and spirituality are restored.  
You see, the Good News is that  
    God sends the Church and the community  
        and your family and friends to be your help,  
            to be your conduit of the Holy Spirit,  
                to be your network of grace and mercy and tough love.

We need all the help we can get. (*Can I get an Amen?!*)  
We need all the help we can get.  
Our addictions and greed, fear and entitlement  
    are in the parking lot doing push-ups,  
        eager to crawl into the broken places and cracks in our facades.  
As they say, *"Right now I may be 50 days sober, but the 51<sup>st</sup> day is a ---."*  
Best bet?  
Surrender; draw strength from God and God's people; practice the disciplines.  
If you're unsure how to set your mind on divine things, fake it till you make it right.  
    Make it right with God and one another and our true selves.

Practice the tools and spiritual disciplines,  
    even if you do not feel it,  
        because by doing so, you are rewiring your mind.  
Thus, we create new neuropathic roadways in our brains,  
    resetting our minds on God,  
        who is strong in our broken places,  
        whose Church, standing four-square in a fragmented world,  
            is called to be a movement for wholeness,  
                inviting us to be better people,  
                    to unite to build a better world.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*