

“Stumbles Along the Way”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur GA
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 26, 2021
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[Link to Live Stream at 10:25 AM via Facebook: First Christian Church Decatur](#)

[Link to Worship Bulletin: DecaturDisciples.org](#)

Mark 9:38-50

Another Exorcist

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone^[a] casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Temptations to Sin

⁴² “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,^[b] it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell,^[c] to the unquenchable fire.^[d] ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.^{[e][f]} ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,^[g] ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire.^[h] ⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?^[i] Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Footnotes

- a. [Mark 9:38](#) Other ancient authorities add *who does not follow us*
- b. [Mark 9:42](#) Other ancient authorities lack *in me*
- c. [Mark 9:43](#) Gk *Gehenna*
- d. [Mark 9:43](#) Verses 44 and 46 (which are identical with verse 48) are lacking in the best ancient authorities
- e. [Mark 9:45](#) Gk *Gehenna*
- f. [Mark 9:45](#) Verses 44 and 46 (which are identical with verse 48) are lacking in the best ancient authorities
- g. [Mark 9:47](#) Gk *Gehenna*
- h. [Mark 9:49](#) Other ancient authorities either add or substitute *and every sacrifice will be salted with salt*
- i. [Mark 9:50](#) Or *how can you restore its saltiness?*

Stumbles Along the Way

We trip, slip, and take a spill
 more often than we may care to admit, to God or ourselves.
Hindrances cause stumbling on the way.
We misstep as individuals.
We also blunder collectively, as communities, congregations, city-states.

What do you think, what do you believe
 the Word of God is encouraging us to do and be, together,
 to acknowledge, remove, and move past stumbling blocks?

Stumbles Along the Way

Charlie Chaplin, clown, mime, actor, director *par excellence* of the silent film era,
 won the affection of millions
 with his funny walk, twitching mustache, skinny cane, and heart of gold.

When I was in clown school
 --back before I ran away from the circus and joined the church—
 teachers Fred “Garbo” Garver and Bob Berky
 taught the art and practice of prat falls
 by beginning their lesson with a story about Charlie Chaplin.

One day Charlie Chaplin was approached by a fan.
“*I have studied your every move,*” said the fan.
 “*I can do everything you do, exactly the same.*”
“*Show me,*” said Chaplin. “*Walk across the room and pretend to trip over something.*”
The fan walked halfway across the room,
 feet sideways, mustache twitching, cane swinging,
 tripped over an imaginary obstacle,
 did a perfect prat fall, got up, then continued to cross the room.
Chaplin said, “*That was remarkable. You only missed one detail.*
 You never looked back to see what tripped you up.”

With that indelible lesson in mind, when I do a prat fall while clowning,
 bumbling over a stumbling block, real or imaginary,
 I regain my balance, pause, and make sure to always look back,
 examining whatever caused me to fall,
 then happily continue on my merry way.

The Sunday evening I preached at Clairmont Oaks Retirement Home in 2006,
 I thought their vespers service needed some livening up.

Wait for it.

So, on the way from the front pew to the pulpit, I did a prat fall.
It was a classic trip.

Garbo and Berky would be proud.
One of my all-time best,
 including the pause, the look back, the happy ascension to the pulpit.
No one laughed.
As a matter of fact, all the oxygen left the room.
Let me ask you: what is one thing senior citizens dread, taking care to avoid at all costs?
Yep.
Falling.
Not only did what John Claypool term "The Preaching Event"
 go rapidly and steadily downhill,
 Clairmont Oaks Retirement Home did not invite me back
 for the next decade.
For ten years folks said, *"Don't bring that guy back; he scares the bejesus out of us."*

Stumbles Along the Way

Today's Word from Mark is dramatic, dire, salty,
 bound and determined to get our attention.
Unlike a prat fall done for fun,
 the Markan passage before us is vivid and serious.

We glean in Mark's Gospel that in the teaching and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth,
 Jesus acknowledges we stumble and bumble, trip and tumble.
Whether of our own making and choices,
 or situational challenges and circumstances,
 hindrances and difficulties and stumbling blocks,
 whether real or imaginary,
 they're a part of life and love and the journey of faith.

Listen to Mark 9: 43-48, a biblical passage that has been handed down
 from the original Aramaic, converted into Greek,
 then translated into every modern language.

--New Revised Standard Version

*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off;
 it is better for you to enter life maimed
 than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.*

--New Jerusalem Bible

And if your hand should be your downfall, cut it off;

Consider the plain-spoken cut-to-the-chase interpretation from **The Message:**

"If your hand or your foot gets in God's way, chop it off and throw it away.

*You're better off maimed or lame and alive
than the proud owner of two hands and two feet,
godless in a furnace of eternal fire.
And if your eye distracts you from God, pull it out and throw it away.
You're better off one-eyed and alive
than exercising your twenty-twenty vision from inside the fire of hell.*

Stumbles Along the Way

Jesus is sure to get one's attention
as he figuratively describes what happens
when--not if, when--people of faith act like stumbling blocks
to other people of faith who seek to follow God.
Jesus points out that preventing someone else's spiritual formation
is akin to having a millstone
draped around one's neck then getting tossed into the sea.

The Church of Jesus Christ
has been known to get in the way of the Church of Jesus Christ!

Case in point:

Look around at this beautiful, loving, serving community of faith.

We have a congregation replete with blessed souls
who are in recovery from the Church, from other Christians,
folks who have become wounded healers,
seeking solace and comfort after being hurt, misused or abused.

Here we are intentionally practicing being kind
because we do not know the burdens each other carries.

Here we offer extra compassion and take extra care and pass out extra gold stars,
encouraging each other to be permission givers
rather than stumbling blocks or to block up the hall.

Jesus teaches us to be vigilant, to be alert, awake and aware
of the causes of stumbles, of downfalls,
of whom or what is getting in the way.

Could it be me?

Lord, have mercy.

Let us be intentional about cutting off and out
the temptation to prevent or block new seedlings from taking root
...and about refocusing our commitment to Christ and one another.

Let's be honest and authentic with each other.

We know the expected answer about setting our minds on God's Way
and not getting tripped up or tripping someone else along the 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 response is supposed to be to keep moving forward, together,
to simply set our minds on Jesus, but it sounds hard to me.

Stumbles Along the Way

Find a way to forgive what has happened in the past.

Sports coaches say, "Shake it off and get ready for the next play, the next pass."

Shake it off.

Singer songwriter Taylor Swift has made a career from transforming stumbles blocks
into chart-topping records.

*My ex-man brought his new girlfriend
She's like "Oh, my god!" but I'm just gonna shake.
And to the fella over there with the hella good hair
Won't you come on over, baby? We can shake, shake, shake*

Shake it off.

Let it go.

Move on.

Don't look back.

Don't hold grudges.

Okay, let's be real, my friends.

You and I know that this is so much easier said than done.

We have long memories.

No wonder forgiveness does not come easily.

We are so busy looking backward into our past

we lose track, ignore, miss what God is saying to us today, in the present.

And often we nurse grudges, bitterness and resentments.

We nurse our past hurts and harms and hates,

tending them, feeding them, giving them a special place in our hearts and minds,

letting them keep us from sleep and slumber

and distracting us from what is going on in the here and now.

Where there is no forgiveness there is no life.

Let's say that again: Where there is no forgiveness there is no life.

When you have a painful past that needs to be dealt with,

the gift of forgiveness is given to yourself as much as to anyone else.

Anthony De Mello said, "*An unwillingness to forgive others*

*for the real or imaginary wrongs they have done
is a poison that affects our health
– physical, emotional and spiritual – sometimes very deeply.
You commonly hear people say, ‘I can forgive, but I cannot forget!’
or ‘I want to forgive but cannot.’
What they really mean is they do not want to forgive.”*

Forgiveness cleanses the forgiver as well as the forgiven.
Forgiveness is the ultimate gift of God
to help us get over and beyond the stumbling blocks
that trip us up, that make us keep looking backward so much
we forget where we are going or how to look forward with joy.

A grocery store owner passed away quite unexpectedly.
Many costumers had purchased food on credit.
After he died, they refused to pay off their debts to his widow and children.
The family tried in vain to get reimbursed.
Finally one evening the mother called her children into their backyard.
She placed the outstanding bills in a pile on the barbecue grill then set them ablaze.
Even though the family needed the funds the bills represented,
she understood that, more than money,
the family needed their peace of mind.

What bills, what baggage, what burdens that tripped you up
do you need to place at the base of the Cross of Jesus?
Let Christ help you and me and all of us together to acknowledge the real or imaginary,
and then walk away, leaving them behind for Christ alone to toss into the sea.

Stumbles Along the Way

The Good News is we are not defined by our past,
by what once made us stumble and bumble, slip and slide.

Great scene in The Lion King.
Simba is sulking, saying he can't learn from the past.
Rafiki the shaman whacks Simba on the head with a stick.
“Ouch, why did you do that?”
“What does it matter,” says Rafiki, “it is in the past.”
Then Rafiki swings the stick a second time.
Simba ducks.
Rafiki misses and shouts, *“See, you can learn!”*

Clearly not only can we learn from the past, learn from our bumbles and stumbles,
God also learns from our mistakes.
God is constantly changing things up to get our attention:

God changes tactics, methods, people, even conditions
to help us grow and evolve.

The Spirit helps us learn from our past as well as one other's past,
to glean invaluable lessons from living examples around us,
like Garbo and Berky passing on Charlie Chaplin's wisdom,
like me never, ever falling down while en route to the pulpit
--at least not on purpose.

This is what it means to share wisdom in community.

This is what it takes to evolve, to grow, to change for the better.

Regardless of whatever road you have trod,

regardless of what you have done or said, you will never, ever be cut off.

Come to Jesus just as you are, a beloved Child of God,

and trust in the cleansing power and redirecting grace of
the Creator, the Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen!