

"Everything is Wonderful?"

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson - Ezekiel 14:1-6, 11
New Testament Lesson – Mark 9:38-50

A father and daughter were flying cross-country from New York to Los Angeles. The little girl kept looking out the window and exclaiming: "Daddy, Daddy, there's a river ... Look, Daddy, there's a farm ... and a barn. Daddy, Daddy, look at that hill down there ... and there's a beautiful pond with all sorts of ducks in it." The father was busy reading a book, and kept repeating "uh, huh, uh, huh," until he became a little irritated, and then embarrassed by his daughter's excited chatter. Finally he turned to the passengers seated nearby and apologized: "Please forgive my daughter. She still thinks everything is wonderful."

Who do you think, in this situation, "was not 'following us,'" as the apostle John puts it in today's New Testament lesson? Was it the daughter, who as John might have criticized, obviously had no "Christian" reason to be proclaiming the mighty and wondrous works of God – rivers and hillsides, and ponds and rich, bountiful farmland? Or was it the father who strayed from "following" Jesus, by overlooking the most wondrous creation of all – his own daughter and her love of life for life's sake? Such questions were important to the early church when the Gospel According to Mark was written. As followers of Jesus and students of his teachings, these men and women wanted everyone to know that Christ is the source of any wondrous miracle or good deed or blessing. They wanted to protect the integrity of their faith.

Where do we draw the line in giving Christ credit where credit is due? Mark teaches us that whoever participates in a miracle, whether they call themselves Christians or not, whoever does a good deed, or proves to be a blessing in the life of another person, they should be encouraged and supported. That's what Mark teaches us when he reports that "John said to (Jesus), 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.'" And "...whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

These statements embrace any blessing, any good deed, or miracle as supportive of Christ, whether they are thought of that way or not. And that's where Mark's teaching can be of benefit to us in our Christian walk. Have you ever felt that the world would go on spinning just fine without you? Don't we sometimes downplay our role in helping to bring about the Kingdom of God – a world in which care and compassion, peace and

harmony triumph over self-centeredness, neglect, war, and division? Do our good deeds amount to anything in God's kingdom even if we don't connect them to our faith or feel like we're making much of a difference? Last Sunday, I said we would look today at ways to stay in touch with our Christian calling, ways we can access the power of our faith, ways that we can continually claim our identity as followers of Christ. Well, the way that we do that is to pay attention to what Jesus calls "stumbling blocks." Maybe the reason we don't think our good deeds amount to much is because of stumbling blocks. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me," says Jesus, "it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." That's pretty tough stuff; and perhaps fitting for those who stand in between a believer and the Lord God Almighty. Sometimes we do things that sever that connectedness with God, interfere with our calling to follow and serve Christ, defy that God-given desire we that all have to embrace others and help out where needed. The story goes that in Belfast, Ireland, a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister and a Jewish rabbi were really battling it out in a heated theological discussion. Suddenly an angel appears and says to them, "God sends you his blessings. Make one wish for peace and your wish will be fulfilled by the Almighty." The minister said, "Let every Catholic disappear from our lovely Ireland. Then peace will reign supreme." The priest said, "Let there not be a single Protestant left on our sacred Irish soil. That will bring peace to this island." "And what about you, Rabbi?" said the angel. "Do you have no wish of your own?" "No," said the rabbi. "Just attend to the wishes of these two gentlemen and I shall be well pleased." We can't wish away those things that block us from having it our way. In fact, having it our way is often the trouble in the first place. If you think about it, we do get in our own way sometimes, don't we? Sometimes we do things that sever our connectedness with God, interfere with our calling to follow and serve Christ, defy that God-given desire we all have to embrace others and help out where needed. When we block the flow of divine power in our lives, we become subject to one of the harshest thing Jesus ever said: You'd be better off drowned in the sea. But think about it, isn't that how we feel sometimes anyway. When our desire to help the needy sinks beneath the weight of our household bills don't we feel like we're drowning? Or maybe it's the uncertainty of who's really in need and who's abusing the system that makes us feel like true desire to help out can't rise uncertainty all around us? Stumbling blocks. When Sunday worship, family dinners, or personal devotionals are unavoidably disrupted by our work schedules and study time, or our sports practices and weekend lake trips, or our out-of-town travel or out-of-energy bodies, when such things get in the way of our faith practices or spiritual growth – or really get in the way of anything else we know we ought to be doing but can't – don't we feel at those times like we're drowning – like we're being swept away by forces beyond our control?

That's how the earliest Christians felt, like they were drowning amid a sea of different religions, being swept away by the currents of political power, getting battered by the crushing waves of social practices that threatened their Christian way of life – those things for us that are like our over-scheduled days, or our image-driven media, or the quick-fix allure of drugs or the numbing effects of alcohol. Stumbling blocks.

So to help us stay in touch with our Christian calling, and to help us access the power of our faith, and to maintain our identity as followers of Christ, Jesus says, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off...", the same with your foot. "If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out."

Pretty harsh stuff. But of course, Jesus is just making a point: That our own worst enemy is often ourselves or the things we think we can't live without. Jesus is encouraging us to put our faith practices first, even if it means doing without or stretching ourselves in new ways. To stay connected to your faith, you might develop faith-based practices in your home or with your family, things like praying together at meals, or listening to sacred music or praise songs, reading scripture or joining a Bible study, or having devotionals and quiet time. Think if there might be some family practices that could be observed in your home, or some personal routines that might help you stay connected to your faith., particularly when you start feeling disconnected by some blockage Jesus encourages us with harsh images such as of cutting off hands and feet and tearing out an eye because he knows that when we cling to anything over and above our faith – when we allow what's in our hands, or under our feet, or in our line of vision to become a stumbling block between us and God – we miss out on the blessings and good deeds and miracles of being a follower of Christ. And this is true for everyone. Jesus says, "Everyone will be salted by fire." This means that everyone's life has something that could be burned away in order to again take on the true flavor of faithful living – the life-sustaining connections, the wonderful experiences and sensations, the miraculous blessings that come from being a faithful follower of Christ. "Have salt in yourself," says Jesus, "and be at peace with one another." In other words, take on the essence and the flavor of faithful living, and then watch as the world begins to show up differently for you – a world where we have peace within our heart of hearts, a Christ-like peace that springs to life in the people and things around us.

Remember the little girl from the beginning of the sermon, the girl who still thinks everything is wonderful. Were you ever like that? Do you hope and dream that you were? Do you want to preserve that in your children, and in your grandchildren, nieces and nephews; do you want to preserve that sense of wonder in the world at large? We all dream of recapture such a sense of innocence and wonder and joy in life? And yet we often feel too overwhelmed and inadequate to make a difference. Let go of that feeling, and take hold of the dream.

Close your eyes a moment and listen to this excerpt from a poem by the Korean writer Sun Ai Lee-Park. I'll let you know when it's finished.

Close your eyes; listen.

"A stone is thrown into a calm lake and the stone makes waves spreading, reaching to the far side.

Let us throw stones into (the deadly calm of the lake that is our world), no matter how small the stone is, no matter how small is the wave.

The stone brings awakening, the wave is a movement, and the movement spreads when all of us standing together on all sides around the lake keep throwing our little stones. The wave will never cease till the whole lake starts bubbling with life."¹

Picture it; and open your eyes. Could you sense the power that our faith has, the power it takes on when we **tear down those stumbling blocks** that get in between us and God? As we go forth from here today, I invite you to think of ways you can stay in touch with your calling as a Christian, ways that you can continually claim your identity as a follower of Christ. What **faith-based practices** might make a difference in your life and the life of your family? What personal routines might lead you to a deeper connection with God? Even something as small as a little stone can make a difference. What stumbling blocks can any one of us move beyond so as to look upon life and see that everything is wonderful; everything is wonderful when we allow ourselves to reflect the miracles and blessings of a life lived in Christ? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace, forgive us when we are a people of little faith. We are sorry for the times when we have let fear have its way with us instead of releasing our anxieties into the certainty of your love. We confess we get so involved with the minutia of our lives that we neglect to focus on what is really important. Keep us mindful that it is the who that is of importance, not the what. We are mindful of those who hunger for your presence as they struggle through the wildernesses of life, not knowing which way to turn. We pray for those who thirst for an ease to their pain and discomfort, especially for ... The family of Frances Weaverling, for Dorace Wilson ... and those whom we now name in our hearts. Feed them, O God, with your consoling presence that they might be spiritually nourished. Help us to give the gift of your words of hope that those who struggle might see new possibilities for ease and renewal.

We pray also for those traveling to Guatemala this week, for Nancy Ehrlich and the others representing our Presbytery there.

May they go with your blessing, O God, and may the Lord go with them.

We pray all this in the strong name of your son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who taught us to say when we pray saying:

¹ As cited in Pauline Webb's *She Flies Beyond: Memories and Hopes of Women in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 73.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.