

**“Stumbling Blocks”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode**  
**Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**September 27, 2009**  
**Scripture: Mark 9:38-50**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Gracious God, as we hear and think about your Word to us this morning, descend to us, we pray, that we might all ascend as disciples, partners, one family in your name. Amen.*

As many of you know, Dusty and I have three daughters. Our first daughter Nancy lives in the Philadelphia area. Our other two girls, Kati and Chelsi, live here in Dunedin. I know that there are many of you who met Chelsi when she was a ten year old, and that there are many of you who remember her as a soloist for our Christmas Eve Services. I also know, however, that there are many of you here today who have never met Chelsi. Regardless, though, in which group you find yourselves, none of you knew her as a young child.

When Chelsi was growing up, we lived in Delaware. She like most little sisters wanted to do everything the big girls did. One of the activities we encouraged for Kati was participation on the community swim team, which required practice every weekday morning and competition in the swim meets every Saturday.

Since Kati was eight years older than Chelsi, Chelsi pretty much grew up going to swim meets. I guess, then, that it should not have surprised us that she told us she wanted to be a part of the swim team as soon as she could speak the words. So, when Kati was eleven and Chelsi was three, Chelsi decided that she was ready to swim on the swim team. Thankfully, the manager of our team was patient, kind, and willing to let Chelsi be a part of the team.

I will never forget the Saturday that the coach put Chelsi in a race. She only had to swim

25 yards, but it took a **really** long time for her to get to the end of the pool. She would swim about four strokes – turn on her back and float for a few seconds – turn back over and swim – then repeat those actions all the way to the end of the pool. But...the thing is...she finished the race. Everyone applauded and cheered and Chelsi and we were so proud.

I am not sure why our Gospel reading this morning reminded me of that day. I only know that it did. Perhaps the recollection came in something that I didn't share with you. You see, while not all of the pools in the rotation of our swim meets had “starting blocks”, the pool at which Chelsi made her swimming “debut” did. Now, remember that she was three years old, and picture that the starting blocks for swimming races were about 18 inches tall. There was no way that this little girl could get on that starting block unless someone lifted her up and put her on it. And...if no one was willing to do that, that platform would have been, not a starting block, but a “stumbling block.”

So, maybe, my remembrance of that day really **does** make sense. You see, as Jesus and his disciples are walking around the area of Capernaum, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, comes up to his master and gives a report. “Teacher,” he says, “we were out among the people and we saw a man who is not one of us. He was driving out demons and he was doing this in *your* name. Now, we know that he has not been trained like we have been. And we know that he was not chosen as we have been, so we told him to stop because he is not one of us.”

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that the disciples expected to be congratulated. “Good for you!” they expected to hear. After all, we can't let this Kingdom of God business get out of hand! How little they understood where Jesus' teachings would soon take them. They saw themselves as the chosen

people, but soon the doors of Judaism would be opened to the world.

“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name, in the next moment, can say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.” That is totally fascinating to me. The reason for that I think, is that power obsessed leaders – both in Jesus' time and now – so often turn Jesus' teachings on their head and declare, “Anyone who is not for us is against us.”

Moses saved the Jews but Jesus would soon save the world. The Jerusalem Temple was the house of God, but the Church around the world would soon house the Spirit of the Lord. Israel was God's nation but those borders would soon be gone and a new Holy Nation without borders would be established. History would soon replace the Priest of the Holy of Holies with the priesthood of all believers. The disciples had begun to think they were special – that their relationship with Jesus gave them authority and privilege. But Jesus had a better way. They were to be the *facilitators of* – *not the manipulators of* – a new Kingdom. If others came along with gifts and talents, Jesus did not want them hindered. In Jesus' words, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Further more, Jesus says, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me...” Some scholars suggest that the “little ones” refer to the disciples, but Jesus is talking to the disciples. If you ask me, though, this has much more to do with the contrast between the disciples assuming an unauthorized exorcist might cause stumbling, and Jesus thinking petty power plays might, and we are given the great millstone around the neck scenario. If you interfere with the flow of God's grace – if you seek to control or limit the flow – you will drown. It is not a threat. It is a consequence – a dire consequence.

And consider the dire consequences. Not just in light of what you might do to cause others to stumble, but also in light of what you might do to cause yourself to stumble.

Salt is the last driving image of our text. Warning amidst affirmation: however good salt is, the good can be diluted – overwhelmed. So claim salt – the process of cleansing and purifying and preserving.

Jesus came in truth and grace. Here is the truth, my friends. Everything you do is of ultimate significance – causing someone to stumble or helping them along the way. And everything you do has ultimate consequences. So you'd better not mess up. You mess up and you're playing with fire – but that is only one side of the equation. But, here is the other side – “I am with you always”, Jesus says. We are in this together. The truth is that you cannot stop the flow of what is done in the name of our Savior. And what is done in His name, and what flows in His name is grace – the grace of God. It is within this apparent contradiction that God meets us – always wanting more of us and more from us, but loving us just as we are. We are known fully and loved anyway – both warned and affirmed – both excuseless and excused. We face the challenge profound enough to make us lose heart, but surrounded with the grace of God which reminds us that we are in God's heart.

There is a wonderful poem written by Roy Sharpe, which seems to me, puts all of this together:

“Isn't it strange that princes and kings,  
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings,  
And common people like you and me  
Are builders of eternity?  
Each is given a bag of tools,  
A shapeless mass,  
A book of rules;  
And each must ...  
Ere life has flown...

A stumbling block or a stepping stone”

If you ask me, this is a wonderful summary of our Gospel text this morning. Each of us is given a bag of tools. And each of us must choose whether we will be a stumbling block keeping our brothers and sisters from knowing the grace and peace offered through our Lord and savior, or a stepping stone – or maybe a starting block – allowing our brothers and sisters to share the grace and peace with which we are gifted. Each of us – sinful and forgiven – can be – if we will – the stepping stone – the starting block for those who need to hear and to know the good news of the Gospel.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to: Brett C. Blair for his sermon, “Be at Peace With One Another”, Roy Sharpe for his poem, “A Bag of Tools”, King Duncan for his sermon, “Can't We All Just Get Along?”, and John Ballenger for his sermon, “Truth and Grace”.*

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