

## On stumbling blocks and salt

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29

Psalm 19:7–14

James 5:13–20

Mark 9:38–50

### Text: Mark 9:42, 49

‘If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.’

### Introduction

In July (8) of this year author and journalist Terry Glavin published an article in the National Post titled [Canada's Christian prophets weren't white](#). Glavin wrote, “For generations of Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en people along the Bulkley and Skeena rivers of northwestern British Columbia, the arrival of Christianity did not occur when the Oblate missionary James McGuckin came to the area in 1870. As the story goes, when McGuckin showed up in the vicinity ... the people had been expecting him. McGuckin is said to have been told that his visit had been long expected, and that it was understood he’d come from the land of ghosts. The people made the sign of the cross, and they knew all about the commandments, and they knew about heaven. They’d learned these things years earlier from the dreams of the Lake Babine chief, Uzakli, a prophet.

It is a fascinating article. Glavin went on to speak of another Indigenous prophet named Bini. “Anthropologists have speculated that the vivid Christian inflections in Bini’s teachings derive from Indigenous evangelists from Oregon, or from the word-of-mouth journey of ideas from Catholic missionaries or devout Métis people east of the Rocky Mountains, or via some similarly circuitous theological transit from the outer coast, originating with an Orthodox missionary from Russian Alaska.” As I read these stories I was reminded of the Apostle Paul’s message at Lystra, “In past generations he (God) allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good...” (Acts 14:16-17)

1. Many times we hear such stories with mixed reactions. On the one hand we marvel at God’s incursion into their lives and on the other hand is the impetus to correct any misconceptions about the gospel we might find. Perhaps this impetus to correct led the church too easily to join Canada’s government in the blight of Residential Schools overlooking the problem of the government-mandated violation of parental rights. (An error gaining currency again today).

Our gospel readings today come from the section in Mark’s gospel where Jesus has drawn aside to teach his disciples about the Messiah’s mission and what it means to be his disciples. Recall the argument that broke out among the disciples about who was the greatest. Jesus sat down with them and took a young child in his arms to teach them that in the kingdom ‘the first must be last of all and servant of all.’ This is the scene in which these teachings of Jesus unfold.

The apostle John then asks, “Teacher, we saw someone casting our demons in your name and he wasn’t following us so we told him he had to stop.” 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.’ There was a similar incident in our older testament reading from the book of Numbers. Joshua, Moses’ assistant, was upset because two men were not following protocol but prophesied anyway. Joshua thought Moses should stop them. Moses said, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!’

Whoever is not against us is for us. Do you hear the open-hearted gentleness Jesus is commending for his followers? Yes, we Christians are to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the clearest way possible. But Jesus is the one who does the saving. Resist the urge to correct the person just beginning in faith. Always keep in mind how long it took us to come to a level of maturity in faith; and maturity surely teaches us we have a long way yet to go. Are we not always finding that we need adjustment and rethinking as we probe the gospel? Demanding too much too soon can be a stumbling block to faith.

2. Do these sayings of Jesus about stumbling blocks to faith cause a certain level of disquiet as you read them? “It would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea;” this is not a verse of scripture we are quick to memorize yet we can’t get it out of our heads. It is not likely the place we would want the person unacquainted with the Bible to begin reading. Do you read this and wonder what happened to the “come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest” Jesus? Who is this ‘millstone around your neck,’ ‘cut your hand off,’ guy?

Allow me to ask you a question (or two). When you want to warn your children or grandchildren of something that is very dangerous, how strident is your description of the danger? When our children were young we put those plastic protectors in the electrical outlets of our homes so they did not accidentally push something into the outlet that could cause serious harm. As they get older and we teach them how to plug electrical devices into these outlets we generally include important warnings about putting anything else into the outlets. When you describe this danger do you pussyfoot around? Do you describe the danger as ‘it might give you a wee bit of a jolt?’ No. You describe the danger in the starkest of terms because you want to impress on your child the reality of a danger that could cost a life.

What is the danger that Jesus warns his disciples about in so stark a manner? It is clear that Jesus understands faith—believing in him—to be of utter and bedrock importance. Just as we guide our children so they avoid dangers that could cost them their lives, Jesus teaches his disciples that nothing rises in importance above faith in him. The Greek word we translate ‘to stumble’ is the word from which we get our English word ‘scandalize.’ It means to cause to stumble or to cause to falter or err. As a noun it means a stumbling-block, an impediment, a cause or occasion of sinning. You will note that Jesus was as insistent with respect to stumbling blocks that cause others to stumble as he was about self-inflicted stumbling blocks things that trip you up.

It is easy to see the harm done to faith by the residential schools. In addition to the harm of forced separation from parents there were the abuses that occurred by some entrusted with the

care of these children. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report that details these events is difficult reading. The message of the gospel is more difficult to hear today because of the complicity of the church in running these schools. Is it any wonder that Jesus described the danger of putting ‘a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,’ in these starkest of terms?

We rightly abhor the abuse of little ones whose trust of adults was taken advantage of and trampled upon. Jesus did have a child in his arms as he said some of these things. Yet the little ones also extends to those who are just beginning in faith as well. We seem naturally to be repulsed by the harm done to ‘little ones’, the harm done when trust is trampled upon. Yet Jesus had just as stark of things to say about things that could cause us ourselves to go astray from faith. “Cut it off, pluck it out!”

As you reflect on the blunt (and perhaps some feel abrasive) talk of Jesus’ sayings here I invite you to consider how these first disciples understood Jesus. Keep in mind that Mark writes his gospel to encourage beleaguered Christians set upon by persecution to hold on to faith. Mark does not consider this too difficult to hear. Plainly, the disciples know that Jesus is using hyperbole to stress the danger. There is no record of the Apostle holding services for drowning of offenders or cutting off of appendages. Furthermore, these disciples continue to follow Jesus—they are not put off by this talk. The tone in Jesus’ voice must have conveyed his deep concern for their wellbeing.

How did Jesus speak of the danger of rejecting faith? “... it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.” The Greek word translated ‘hell’ is ‘γέενναν’(gheh'-en-nah). It means ‘Valley of Hinnom’ which was Jerusalem’s garbage dump where garbage fires continually burned. It was a term used in apocalyptic literature for the ultimate place of punishment for the ungodly. Plainly, for Jesus, the danger of hell is real and dreadful; he does not want anyone to come to this place.

Jesus is stressing the necessity of faith—relationship with God. Unbelief is not benign. The gospel reveals our condition—we have turned away from God and rejected him. God is the one who finds this unbearable and comes among us in Jesus to turn us back to himself. To persist in our unbelief is to reject God to the point that he gives us what we want—existence without him. Godforsakenness. Hell is godforsakenness. No one in this life is godforsaken—God has not turned his back on the world nor abandoned us. As God says through the Psalmist, “When the earth totters, with all its inhabitants, it is I who keep its pillars steady.” (Psalm 75:3) At the cross Jesus Christ bears our sin and experiences godforsakenness so we never have to. According to Jesus, the prospect of godforsakenness is fearsome.

In Mark’s gospel, as he gathers together these sayings of Jesus about stumbling blocks to faith, the verb ‘to cause to stumble’ appears four times. In the space of a few verses Mark uses two different tenses: one tense suggests completed action in the past, one occurrence only; the other tense suggests an ongoing phenomenon. What might this indicate? New Testament scholar Ronald Ward said, “in a moment of carelessness or spiritual inattentiveness or outright folly the Christian can be overtaken by sin. Horrified he says, ‘Never again!’, and it’s done with. And

then there's the Christian's besetting temptation with which he has to struggle every day." I find this to be wise pastoral counsel.

3. Now about salt. Jesus said, "For everyone will be salted with fire." Mark seems to think Jesus' meaning to be obvious. First, salt and fire are used metaphorically in biblical literature, Keep in mind that Jesus is talking with his disciples. On another occasion Jesus said "you are the salt of the earth." In the older testament these two symbols come together in the requirement that grain offerings, which were burned, must be accompanied by salt, together with the sweeping generalization that "with all your offerings you shall offer salt." (Leviticus 2:13) The disciples are familiar with these regulations. Their dedication to the service of their suffering Messiah is like that of a burnt offering, total and irrevocable. Fire occurs frequently as an image for suffering. So this saying that the disciple will be salted with fire could express an idea similar to when Jesus said to his followers that "you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."

Another possibility is that Jesus is using 'fire' as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of Matthew's gospel John the Baptist says this of Jesus; "but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." And on the day of Pentecost the presence of the Holy Spirit was seen as tongues of fire. You hear me pray each week before the sermon for the Holy Spirit to come like a fire and burn. I think this line of interpretation the more promising in understanding our Lord's saying here. The fire of the Holy Spirit is contrast to the fire of Gehenna.

Salt, as you know, is for both seasoning and preservation. 'Salt is good,' as Jesus went on to say. If the disciple is to be the salt of the earth from where does the savory nature derive? As sinners it is not naturally in us. It is the work of God in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. 'Have salt in yourselves,' said Jesus. The Apostle Paul noted, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) Would not these things promote what our Lord calls from his disciples—"and be at peace with one another.'

You will notice that Jesus does not spend a lot of time identifying stumbling blocks—he stresses the urgency of treating them as stumbling blocks—getting them out of the way. But he does not give a removal formula. Sometimes focussing on our stumbling blocks can have the effect of keeping us in their orbit, a focus on what not to do often frustrates. What Jesus does tell his disciples to do is 'have salt in yourselves.' I believe that the focus on what to do is how to jettison what not to do. In all this we look to Jesus for his help; in the experience of the love of Jesus for us flooding our hearts we experience what one preacher called 'the expulsive power of a new affection.'

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