

## ON GETTING RID OF STUMBLING BLOCKS

I was sitting at my desk, working on this sermon. I was sitting there, praying, agonizing over this Word of God, straining to hear the Word our Lord wants to speak to us today.

As I was sitting there I became aware of what my eyes were seeing. Nathan, our son, is a gifted photographer and he loves to put his pictures on the screen saver of my computer. And there, on my computer, before my eyes, were pictures of our grandchildren - laughing, running, crawling, throwing a ball, being fed in the high chair, sleeping in my arms. As I began to focus on the pictures, I began to hear the words of Jesus, "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."

The words were haunting. What if I should cause one of these little ones to stumble? Avery, Nicholas, Lucas - three little guys who have stolen my heart. What if I should cause one of them to stumble, to sin?

I sat there, listening to the words of Jesus, and I imagined him holding a child who had crawled up onto his lap, snuggling close to Jesus, thumb sticking in his mouth. And I could hear in the words Jesus spoke how much he loved and cared for that child, and for each and every child. And I could also hear in his voice a sternest, a sense of urgency, and I knew he was speaking to me and to each of us, and I could tell this was very, very important to Jesus.

Jesus took sin very seriously. I suppose we would too if we had to be nailed to a cross for it. People today don't seem to be very serious about sin. We don't talk much about it, even in the church. The word "sin" has largely disappeared from public discourse.

A few years ago the researcher, George Barna, conducted a national survey. On this survey was the question, "Are people basically good?" Of those who said they were not Christians, 89% said yes, people are basically good. Surprisingly, of those who said they were Christians, 79% also said yes.

If that is true, if we are basically good, then why did we begin our worship this morning by saying, "We confess that we have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin. We are truly sorry and humbly repent. In your compassion forgive our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do."

The survey posed another question. "When it comes to morals, what is right and wrong, there are no absolute standards that apply to everybody in all situations." Of those who identified themselves as non Christians, 81% agreed. What is shocking is that 70% of Christians agreed that there are no absolute standards of right and wrong.

Can you imagine Jesus agreeing with this? Remember, Jesus is the one who said, "Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven?"

This past week the Bishop was here to talk about the actions of the recent churchwide assembly. After he had talked for about an hour, he opened it up for questions. One person asked, "So what should we teach our children?"

What should we teach our children - and our youth - and adults? What should the church teach? In that same Barna survey two-thirds of Christians said, "There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct." Talk about causing little ones to stumble!

This church has a standard for teaching. It is spelled out in our constitution where it says, "This congregation accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life."

It is time we dust off our Bibles and start reading them. It is time we start gathering together with one another and talking about what the Bible is saying to us. It is time we take the Word of God to heart.

And when we do, we will hear words that give us life! When we do, we will hear Jesus say, "Your sins are forgiven." When we do, we will hear Jesus say, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) When we do, we will hear Jesus say, "I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life." (John 5:24)

These are the words we need to hear. These are the words our children and youth need to hear. These are the words every adult needs to hear. For we stumble, we sin, everyone of us, and we need Jesus to be there for us, to forgive us, to lift us up when we stumble, to set us on the right path, and empower us to live God's way. And Jesus will do that, just as he promised, a promise that is sealed through the blood he shed on the cross.

Let's not cause anyone to stumble. Rather, let's point people to Jesus, for Jesus is our hope, our strength, our life, our salvation!