

Rise Up and Move Forward

(Mark 9:42-50)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 30, 2018

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This has been ... a week. It has been a painful several days, a time when the great division that often ... and visibly ... defines our world today has been on full, emotional display. I am not going to stand here this morning and rehash everything that has taken place. We have all been witnesses to the anger, grief and fear dominating and consuming the lives of so many. We have heard the loud voices of critics on both sides of the debate. Most powerfully of all, in my view, we have heard the voices of countless survivors being raised, many for the first time after decades of being afraid to speak up for fear of the response they would receive – and even the fear some had of reprisal or disavowal.

Speaking for myself, I will say this: as a former congressional staffer, it pains me after having watched the spectacle of this week to see how great the divide has grown in a body in which I learned so much. As a priest, it grieves me to watch how people continue to treat one another even as I try to see where Christ is in the midst of this time, and to see a lack of respect at a moment when dignity should be acknowledged. And as a flawed and imperfect member of the family of God, I have struggled to come to terms with my own very emotional response, rooted in personal beliefs, to what has happened.

In the words of the Gospel reading from this morning, it was a week in which many eyes, hands and feet were torn away or cut out. My deepest concern about all of this, however, is that in watching the way people have attacked one another I have seen them not cut out or tear away their own eyes, hands and feet, but those of others. Instead of removing those things that cause ourselves to stumble, I have observed with great sorrow – and yes, admittedly, great anger – people doing things to cause others to stumble.

The first followers of Jesus gave up a lot when invited to follow him in his ministry: their work; their families; their place in their communities; their anonymity. Giving up everything for what was essentially for them an unknown quantity might at first seem to be a difficult decision. There was however something about Jesus ... some indescribable quality ... that made it easy for the 12. For others, the pull to follow Jesus was much more difficult. In Luke, for instance, a rich young ruler asked Jesus how to attain eternal life was told that he needed to sell everything and distribute it to the poor ... and only then could he follow him. In that instance,

rather than responding with joy the young ruler responded with sadness, “for he was very rich.”¹

So to hear Jesus saying these words to them – hearing him tell them to sacrifice any parts of their bodies that cause them to stumble – was undoubtedly a shock to them. They had, after all, already given up seemingly everything; now this? They likely did not understand that Jesus was telling them that in order to preserve the community, there may be a time when they would have to “sacrifice their own wellness.”²

The particular choice of body parts to which he referred in this passage would have certainly been very familiar to anyone living in the world of his day; injuries to hands, feet and eyes would have been common to those working in farming and agriculture or engaged in crafts trades, such as carpentry.³ But unlike any such injury a farmer or craftsman might have received, which would have severely inhibited their ability to continue in their work, we are told that our journeys will be made easier when the things causing us to stumble on those journeys are removed.

Made easier? That seems counterintuitive ... until you consider the things to which our eyes and feet lead us. In a commentary on this passage, for instance, the theologian Mary Jane Kerr Cornell discusses how feet move us towards a destination and places losing a foot in the context of removing those things that pull us off of God’s path and put our personal goals in direct conflict with the goals God has for us.⁴ Eyes are the things that respond to the things “seeking to draw our attention” away from God – the distractions of everyday life.⁵

But Cornell also brings up something else, an idea rooted in the reality of differing positions and points of view. She discusses how people often perceive these differences as the stumbling blocks placed in our paths by those with whom we disagree. But that perception, she contends, comes from the fact that people often “too narrowly define God’s truth, and that narrow point of view could be causing others to stumble.”⁶

Causing others to stumble – the point at which I began this sermon. But there is an important missing ingredient in all of this, something that even this week I have seen and something which I encourage everyone to remember. As followers of Christ, as believers living in community, there is another step we can and should take beyond eliminating the things that cause us to stumble.

Even as we lift ourselves up from stumbling, we should lift others as well. What Cornell says are often narrow points of view or narrow definitions of God’s truth should not be barriers, but

¹ Luke 18:23 (NRSV).

² Joyce Ann Mercer in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, p. 294.

³ Mark 9:42-50, in *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8: *Matthew and Mark*, p. 640.

⁴ Mary Jane Kerr Cornell, in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, p. 292.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mary Jane Kerr Cornell, in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, p. 294.

rather sparks for enlightened conversation. Instead of being a family of God whose members bicker and try to find ways to cause one another to stumble, we should be mindful of our neighbors – and love them – by keeping them up rather than standing by and watching them fall.

The path on which we each walk is difficult and uneven. There are enough challenges in this life without people pushing one another down as they pass. And yet despite this, I look at each of you and I have hope. I look at you and see not feet tripping others, but hands extended to steady them on the journey. I look at you and see the people who, similar to the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking, sacrifice for the sake of preserving the community.

This week I saw some of the worst that humanity has to offer. Today, I give thanks the reminder of the best we have to offer – the reminder offered by each of you. I give thanks for a community that despite its different views does not allow them to interrupt its shared journey. I pray that you are always willing, even as you defend your own perspectives, to be respectful of the perspectives of others.

May you – may we – always seek to be a force to move humanity forward with love and a respect for the dignity of all. And when things in the world seem to be crashing down upon us, may we always be the examples of Christ in the world to which others look and for which God will one day say, “Well done, good and faithful servants.”

Amen.