

From Rock to Stumbling Block

Cooke's-Portsmouth

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Matthew 16:21-28

If you go into the main office of the church you will find a small pillow on the chair facing Andi's desk. On that pillow is a prayer that is whimsical, but like most things whimsical it also makes you think. It reads: Lord, keep your arm around my shoulder and your hand over my mouth! Wouldn't it be nice if we had a Guardian Angel who would jab us in the ribs or keep us from saying something that we are sure to regret. I am no stranger to moving my lips before I engage my brain, and while I am getting better at remaining mute and giving a situation some thought before I speak, I have many a glib remark that I would love to take back. Poor Peter from today's gospel is a prime example.

One moment he is being lauded by Jesus for his depth of understanding-being called the Rock upon which Christ will build his church. He will be entrusted with the keys to the kingdom and the next moment he is being rebuked by Jesus for speaking his mind. From Rock to stumbling block in very short order. But it is an easy mistake to make.

As preachers of the gospel we prefer to speak about the glory even in the inglorious. Talk of suffering and death is not what people want to hear. So Peter tests his new found authority rather audaciously: by rebuking Jesus. He clearly had some notion in his mind of what the Messiah of God was capable of. He would overthrow oppressive empires and restore the Jewish Kingdom as elect. His was a doctrine of power and could result in revolt. Human revolt would result in much bloodshed and the loss of innocent victims. The way of Jesus called for the blood of one for the

redemption of many. Rather than take Peter aside and chastise or correct him in private, Peter's humiliation is public-and by extension becomes the public chastisement for all of us who prefer the easy way. The tables have turned for the rock.

He becomes a stumbling block in rejecting suffering as a means to an end. And Jesus not only calls him out on it but makes a figurative line in the sand. Those who want to preserve their lives will lose it. Discipleship calls the follower to deny the self and take up the cross and follow. Not a message that Peter wanted to hear and integrate and not one that we are comfortable being reminded of. At some level of our being we want to believe that faith and discipleship will be a reward unto itself. We will be protected and saved from indignity, suffering and cruel and undeserved death. But you know as well as I that no one can cheat death.

And despite the great gains made in pain treatment some deaths are still wracked with pain and suffering and medically assisted death is now an option for those who reach their limits and are beyond pain control from science. Stumbling blocks abound in so many forms and places.

Randy Paush was a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University who wrote a book titled *The Last Lecture*. He had been diagnosed with terminal illness while still a young man; devoted husband and father of three. The book was inspired by an actual lecture in which he shared with students and family the importance of overcoming obstacles and seizing every moment because "time is all you have and you may find one day that you have less than you think" It is a powerful and inspirational book about living life fully and with courage and conviction. Throughout the book he references often the importance of failure as a conduit for learning, and success. As an educator he wanted to instill in his students the courage to risk-even if the end result was not what was hoped for. To that end he developed the First Penguin Award.

A stuffed toy penguin was awarded to the team of students that took the biggest gamble in trying new ideas or new technology while failing to achieve their stated goals. In essence it was an award for “glorious failure” and it celebrated out of the box thinking and using imagination in a daring way.

The title of the award came from the notion that when penguins are about to jump into water that might contain predators, there had to be a first penguin. Sometimes the first penguin in was sacrificed for the rest of the colony. He goes on to suggest that start-up companies often prefer to hire a chief executive with a failed start up in his or her background. The person who failed often knows how to avoid future failures. The person who knows only success can be more oblivious to all of the pitfalls. He concludes, “Experience is what you get when you didn’t get what you wanted. And experience is often the most valuable thing you have to offer.” (Pausch 148-149).

Failure has taken on negative connotation. And I will concede that there are levels of failure. A company mismanaged so that it becomes bankrupt and puts people out of work is not the measure of failure that Pausch was espousing. He was encouraging dreaming big and taking huge risks to develop an idea or a product with far reaching possibilities. While most of us would prefer to succeed, we probably can admit that we have gleaned deeper insights and learning with failures than with our successes. Or when things have not gone as we hoped. The notion of glorious failure producing better than anticipated results awes us.

Nothing succeeds like success, so the apostle Peter was pretty taken aback when Jesus began to teach that suffering, rejection and death were part of the plan for both Jesus and his followers. To Peter this was absurd! Even glorious failure is still failure! But to think with such narrow vision is what transforms a rock into a stumbling block.

This text hints at a truth that has been grappled with since Jesus walked and talked: disciples take offence with the suffering Christ. We want to acknowledge that suffering is a part of the story but we try to curtail talk of it to a few times of the year or with side bar and side glance. We prefer talk of hope and glory; success and victory. And while I concede that this is preferable it is becoming harder and harder in the time in which we live to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to those realities that headline the news and occupy our waking thoughts.

The destructive power of nature like Hurricane Harvey displaces people and property.

Yet another missile strike from Korea over Japan in recent days and ongoing boasting and threat of arsenal capability.

Political leaders who seem to channel the mythic image of Nero playing the fiddle while Rome burns.

We shake our heads daily in incredulity at so many things: the denial of climate change as it effects weather patterns.

Tearing up trade agreements when the world economy needs wise and inspired leadership.

The rise of groups with hatred and bigotry as a foundation. We cannot simply echo that God is in heaven and all is right with the world because this would require a naiveté that defies reality.

Reality can be large and onerous stumbling block to the person of both reason and faith. At the same time most of us do not cross the threshold of a church on a Sunday morning to be reminded of what we have witnessed the night before on the evening news.

We want to find a toe hold in the shifting sands; need a truth to grasp onto as the world changes before our very eyes. We want the steadfast and immovable rock and not the stumbling block of

reality. And yet the stumbling block of suffering is the rock of salvation. Peter understood who Jesus was : Messiah of God- what he did not understand and objected vociferously to- was how Jesus was going to accomplish his mission: through rejection, suffering, death and ultimately resurrection.

The way of the cross with all of its ingloriousness has always been distasteful. And Jesus was no stranger to attempts to turn his head away from the way of suffering. After his baptism and before he began his formal ministry Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted. In this test of wills the adversary of Jesus was Satan, and he tried to convince Jesus to take the easy route. And despite being tired and hungry Jesus would have none of it.

He set his sights on Jerusalem and would not allow even his most trusted disciple to dissuade him. And when we are sorely pressed by world events that cause us to question God's authority and power; when we are wracked with pain of diagnosis and a hopeless prognosis; when our prayers seem to go unheard and unanswered it is all too easy for us to echo the words of Peter and say, "God forbid!" But suffering is a part of the journey or what is Calvary for. And while the hand of God does not reach out to divinely alter the circumstance the rock of faith can help to ground us. Albert Camus has written: "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back."

It may just remind that the rock of faith is always there. It is the foundation upon which we stand. Even if we lose sight of the invisible rock when the visible reality is so much easier to see. When the stumbling blocks threaten to overwhelm repeat this little prayer: Lord, keep your arm around my shoulder and your hand over my mouth!

