

Stumbling Blocks and Beloved-ness

Romans 12: 9-21; Matt 16: 21-28

Beloveds, today is our last official day with one another. As I sat at my desk trying to write this sermon, I found myself distracted. Surely, the time had not yet come. But, alas, our world and our community run on God's time and, whether I wanted it or not, the time has come.

It has been an immense pleasure to get to know you better, as both a community with a rich history and as individuals. It is without question that this community was built on and sits firmly rooted in generations of rich, devoted faith. It is a true blessing to have such a solid foundation. It is a blessing to be an integral and needed part of the lives of many in the Westhampton community.

It is a blessing, and it is a responsibility. With the strength of so many generations of seekers supporting you, there is a sacred calling yet to be fulfilled. That is because, in many ways, it can never be fully realized. It is the sacred calling of all the faithful to speak into and live fully into our time and into our place. This is work you all began before the pandemic. I've heard about discussions begun with Pastor Tadd long before my arrival, and I've seen it in the small group reading of the book, *Weird Church*. You began to think about and reflect on who this community will be in the years to come. You began to work on articulating who this church can and will be to your children, grandchildren, students and the generations who come thereafter.

Over the course of this summer, our Gospel readings have been winding their way through the Book of Matthew. On our first official Sunday together during Pastor Tadd's sabbatical, our Matthew reading began at the end of Matthew's gospel. In Chapter 28, we heard Jesus' second commissioning of the disciples when he said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And, remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28: 19-20) Of course, we were already in the third month of the pandemic, so any notion that we were called to go out and make disciples seemed rather far-fetched, and, yet, Jesus does commission all his followers (you and I included) to go out and share the Good News.

That very same week, we also had the story of Creation in Genesis 1. We were reminded that we were created by God along with every living creature. Humans were created by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which breathed life into us and animates our most pure essence. We were reminded that Creation and humanity, at its core, is good. Jesus, therefore, comes to us to remind us of this Good News and to instruct us on how we can experience it in our lives and in our communities.

Jesus was doing so in a time much like our own. It was tumultuous and uncertain. I know we often take solace in quaint images of a cute baby Christ or in a strong man powerfully leading a mighty group, but let's be honest about the reality of Jesus and his followers. I, too, love such heart-warming images. Yet, such images are not historical fact.

Jesus and his fellow Israelites lived human lives with human problems. They felt the constant threat of danger; they were often locked in cycles of fear and threats of violence. This is not something to turn away from; it is a source of Christian strength.

Like ancient Israel, our summer has also been a time of tumult. We have been cycling between fear, the threat of danger, the actual experience of danger, the sadness of loss and the disorientation of watching our society flail about in all manners of confusion, fear-mongering and real danger. Crises usually bring society together, but for the first time in the history of my life, Americans have not been able to do this. Instead, many have contented themselves with remaining divided and fractured: holding out for a victory and supremacy over their perceived enemy.

Jesus and his disciples lived in the same sort of world. Some of the Jews sought the favor of Rome, and were willing to trade the lives and comfort of other Jews for their personal safety and ease. They were willing to offer some as a sacrifice for their own gain. Others, like Jesus and his disciples, recognized that they were in it together. Over time, they even realized that this was not a Jew and a Gentile issue. It was not the Jewish community against the oppression of Rome alone. The Jesus movement was moved and changed by their interactions with Samaritans and Phoenicians. The movement for liberation and prosperity for all grew rather than shrunk.

Jesus and his disciples knew something we must continually remind ourselves – there is enough. The abundance of God’s love and the abundance of God’s gifts to humanity contains enough for each and every single being in Creation. Our God is not small. God, as known in Jesus, is not for any one nation or even one particular group. God came incarnate on the Earth for everyone, and to share God’s love with everyone.

In Jesus, and his early followers, we see clearly God’s desire for us to share this love as boldly and widely as possible. With that in mind, I shared with you my dream for this pandemic time. My hope was for God’s love to spread. For God’s love to use this time to spread from person to person in the care and support we can offer one another. We imagined together what it might look like for God’s love to become so infectious it went viral spreading outward from this little church in Westhampton across the Valley, across the state and maybe even to our nation’s capital.

Throughout the summer, we worked on that. The food pantry was maintained and well-cared for. Hospitality was extended farther and wider with the help of Zoom. We held socially-distanced outdoor services and a vigil to respond to the needs of our town and community. We continued learning and reflecting on what the current needs of the community are and where this community might grow next. We explored what it means to share the Good News with others, and allowed ourselves to enter into the difficult spaces of reflecting on where our nation continues to hemorrhage and groan with the labor pains of possible change. Each week, we have been held and guided by who Jesus is and what he calls us to do.

This is, of course, not the easiest of tasks. Peter, in our Gospel reading this morning, also struggles with accepting Jesus’ ministry and calling; therefore, by default, his own ministry and calling. When Jesus tells the disciples his call is to sacrifice himself for the community, Peter exclaims, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” (Matt 16:22) Peter’s exclamation speaks to the hope and sustenance Jesus’ presence gives Peter and the other disciples. Peter cannot imagine a world in which the momentous task of sharing God’s love in

turbulent times will become his own. He doesn't want to imagine such a time, so he asks Jesus to reject it.

Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matt 16:23) Peter's attempt to stop Jesus from fulfilling his God-given calling is named, by Jesus, as satanic. Jesus, in all his humanity, has no real desire to die. He would love to choose to live and be among his people as they move forward on their journeys. He would love to choose the safety and security of remaining among the community he has come to know and love. For Peter to hold that up as a possibility is a real and powerful stumbling block to Jesus' realization of his ministry. Peter's sin is tempting Jesus with the choice of denying his purpose. Peter's sin is separating Jesus from his beloved sacredness. Peter is trying to stop Jesus from fulfilling his destiny of showing us what fully realized compassion looks like.

Jesus names Peter's mistake, but he doesn't break his relationship with Peter. He doesn't end Peter's participation in the community. He does not ostracize him. Jesus tells Peter to get behind him. In the Greek, this is the very same verb translated in other passages as "follow me." Jesus reminds Peter that his followers are to take up their cross and follow him into this new scary future. This is an admonition he states earlier in Matthew just after the commissioning of the twelve when he states, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matt 10: 38) In many ways, this is not metaphoric. Jesus, his disciples, and the entire Roman world are well aware that the cross is a real thing. It was the final outcome for anyone who stood up to power with love. It was the final outcome for anyone who stood in the way of Rome's assertion of sovereignty, chosen-ness and law-and-order.

You see, Rome asserted that their ruler, their emperor was the son of God. They printed such a decree on their money and used it among the various titles given to Caesar Augustus, *Divi Filius* or Son of God. By openly declaring Jesus the Son of God, the disciples were likely to be executed in much the same way as Jesus, crucified on a cross. Jesus tells them to look fear, uncertainty, and even death in the face without wavering. Don't run towards it, but also don't cower in fear trying to avoid it.

And isn't that exactly how it feels to stand up for love? Isn't that exactly how it feels to stand up for another whose beloved-ness seems to be in question? It is perilous. It feels scary. It is as scary as going to the grocery store in the midst of a raging pandemic in order for your family to have food. It is as scary and anxiety inducing as showing up to your job at the post office, in a hospital, or in a public school. It is taking a calculated risk for the betterment of others. It is self-sacrificing love which overcomes the stumbling blocks of our human biological drives for safety, security and stability.

At the heart of what Jesus is saying to Peter is that when we embody compassion humanity is redeemed. The Apostle Paul helps the first generation of believers to wrestle with following this call after Jesus is gone. In our Romans reading, Paul offers an interpretation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Paul speaks into his time and place, a time in which Jesus followers are routinely martyred. They are killed for continuing to follow Jesus when they are expected to follow Rome and expected to declare the emperor the Son of God.

Paul tells these early Christians the way through the fear and uncertain times is to focus on the beloved-ness of humankind. The way over the stumbling blocks of our time is to focus on the universal and unconditional love God showed humanity in the life of Jesus. Paul tells us, "Let

love be genuine; Love one another with mutual affection ... do not lack in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering ... extend hospitality to the strangers ... do not repay evil with evil ... live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12:9-18)

As you continue to move through this pandemic time, I know you will do well in taking care of another. You have done so time and time again. It will not make these times feel less scary, but I am certain it will bring you solace and sustain you. My hope for this community is that you also will use this time to continue your reflections on who Westhampton Congregational UCC will be for the next generation.

Throughout the summer, we experimented with new things, and tried on some new ways of thinking. I heard from many of you the seeds of wonderful ideas for the future. Sow them all. Sow freely and widely. Water these ideas and tend to them. The ones which are naturally your gifts (the ones God is calling you to) will take root and, in time, will bear fruit.

All that is required is to be led by the Spirit. Let the Spirit move you. Feel where the Holy Spirit tugs at your compassion and let it propel you forward. The fractures of this world are not yours to fix alone. It is the combined effort of all believers who upon recognizing their own beloved-ness being present in another human being allow the Holy Spirit to ignite their compassion.

Led this way, we will not be overcome by evil. We will not be destroyed by a pandemic. We will not be overcome by social unrest. We will not be left in despair by racially motivated murder. We *will* overcome evil with good. Love *will* reign. God’s radical and unconditional love *will* go viral: one believer, one seed, one fruit bearing plant at a time.