

The Stumbling Block

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 16:21-28

Delivered on August 30, 2020

La Iglesia Presbiteriana de Jesus el Buen Pastor. The Presbyterian Church of Jesus the Good Shepherd. That is a name that I will never forget because when I was in my first pastorate in North Carolina some twenty years ago, that was our sister church. Jesus El Buen Pastor was a church in Guatemala, and being their sister church for us meant that we would write letters to them and send them gifts and one day the pastor of this church even came up to North Carolina for a visit. Now in this past week as I worked on this sermon I tried to remember this man's name, I feel that I should remember it because he stayed as a guest in my home during his entire visit, but I guess my memory just won't go back that far. But what I do remember is that we had a wonderful relationship with this sister church, and because our church took this relationship seriously, one day after their pastor came to visit, it came time for me to reciprocate this gesture by flying down to Guatemala with a group from North Carolina. So I got all set to go. I got my passport and my shots, I got a duffle bag. I still have that duffle bag, by the way. I got my plane ticket and one day I was sitting in my study counting down the days until my big trip, with visions dancing in my head of all the sights and sounds of this exotic place so far from home. Well, suddenly my daydreaming was interrupted by the sound of the phone ringing. It was my dad. We started with some small talk and then he told me he had been reading some things about how dangerous Guatemala is for American tourists and he didn't want me to go. He didn't want me to go. Well, as you might imagine that led to a disagreement, an argument even. And finally I ended the conversation by saying "Dad, I'm not a child any more, I'm almost thirty years old, and I am the pastor of a church. And I'm not about to back

out of doing my duty to serve this church by being a part of something that's important to them because my parents don't want me to do it." And I hung up the phone. But then, later after I calmed down, I called back and apologized. I had to go, and it would have been cowardly to back out of going, but I also understood my dad's instinct to want to protect his child. That is what dads do. That is what moms do. They protect. I understood that. And as I thought about it, it occurred to me that if my dad never cared what happened to me, I would have felt much worse.

And that's not just what moms and dads do that's also what friends do. When you see that your friend is in danger you try to protect them if you are a true friend. And that is why in this passage when Jesus starts talking to the disciples about being rejected by the chief priests and scribes and killed, Peter says no. He says God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you. As a friend he is trying to protect Jesus. But what Jesus is talking about is something far more important than my little trip to Guatemala. What Jesus is talking about is something he must do for the salvation of the world. And so when Peter tries to stop him out of this protective affection for him, Jesus calls him Satan and a stumbling block. Get behind me, Satan, Jesus says. You are a stumbling block to me. And what he means is that Peter is making Jesus stumble by putting his affection for Jesus and his natural willingness to protect Jesus before his mission to save the world. Now, I know what you're going to say. You're going to say that just as I couldn't fault my father too much for wanting to stop me from going to Guatemala, neither can we fault Peter too much for this. He loved Jesus, he didn't want him to die. If he didn't care, that would have been bad.

I see what you mean, but there's a problem here. Because you see, while that would be an excusable mistake for anyone else, it shouldn't be an excusable mistake for Peter. If James, or Philip or Matthew or any of the other disciples tried to put their affection for Jesus ahead of his mission that would be okay. They were supposed to be ordinary people who make ordinary mistakes. But Peter was supposed to be different. You see when Jesus says to Peter you are a stumbling block to me, what is going on here is a sort of play on words, because Peter is a word that means rock, from which we get words like petrified. Peter's real name as you may know was Simon but Jesus changed his name to Peter, which means rock. And so in this play on words Jesus is saying Peter you are a rock that I am tripping over. But that is not originally why Jesus called Simon Peter. He called Simon Peter because he said you are the rock on which I will build my church. You are the rock on which I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And so how can that be so? How can it be that the rock which is the foundation of the church become a stumbling block, a rock that Jesus trips over? How can Jesus say the gates of hell shall not prevail against you and in the very next passage call Peter "Satan"? Well, we Protestants think we have an answer. Now, fasten your seatbelts this morning because we're really going to have some fun now. You see the whole name Peter is a name that our Catholic friends down the street at St. Paul's understand differently than we Protestants. Now as you probably know, Catholics and Protestants are different in a lot of ways, but we also read the bible differently. Our Catholic friends believe that when Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter and called him "rock" he was talking about Peter the person, and saying it is upon you as a person that I shall build my church. And that is why Catholics believe that Peter was the first

pope. And that every pope since can trace their lineage all the way back to Peter. We Protestants, however, don't see things that way. We think that what Jesus was talking about when he said he was going to build his church was on Peter's confession of faith and not him as a person. You see Jesus didn't just walk up to Simon one day and start calling him Peter. He called him Peter, because Simon was the first person to declare that Jesus was the Christ and that is when Jesus said you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, so we say it is this confession and not Peter himself upon which the church would be built, because everyone who is a part of the church confesses their faith in Christ. Whenever you join the church at some point you have to confess your faith in Christ.

But that doesn't help much. For even if Peter himself was not the foundation of the church, even we Protestants admit that Peter was gifted. He was gifted with the wisdom to confess that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, so how can the same Peter who made this confession also be the Peter who is the stumbling block? Well, I don't quite know. But at some time or another in your life you might have seen or heard of someone with some amazing gift, some amazing gift with which they serve God, and you probably thought to yourself that person must be darn near perfect, and then you come to find out that they are just like anybody else, and you also wonder how can that be? Well, again, I don't know. But I think what we learn from all this is that the gifts that God gives out to do these amazing things are really all about God, they aren't really about us. Now, I am not suggesting that it doesn't matter what we do with these gifts or that it isn't possible to misuse them or that we shouldn't try to live worthily of them. All of that is true. But the whole point of these gifts is that they're gifts, we don't deserve them. We don't call them rewards. The ability to preach is my gift, it is

not my reward for being good. Now, some of you might be saying if preaching is your gift, I'd hate to hear someone who was cursed. So let me say it this way, *if you think it is a gift*, if you think of it as a gift, think of it as a true gift, not something I deserve. And so it was with Peter. The gift to be the first person with the confession of faith or the first person even upon whose shoulders the church was built, these were true gifts. And that is why someone who could be a rock of strength one moment could be a stumbling block the next.

Here at Northminster and Calvary we do a lot of things that make us look like any other organization in the world. We try to promote our churches as much as possible through social media, and signs and word of mouth, just like any business might advertise themselves or their product. In that way we're like any restaurant or store or profit making corporation. We try to work for the good of our community and our world around us by doing things like feeding the hungry and helping people who suffer from natural disasters. In that way, we're like the Red Cross or the United Way. And we try very hard, very hard to get people to join us and become members. In that way we're like Rotary or the Lion's Club or even a country club. But there is one way, one way in which we're very different from all these groups. It is perfectly acceptable, it is perfectly acceptable for you or me or anyone else to go and apply to work in any of these organizations and say I deserve to run this organization and here's why. Or I deserve to belong to this organization and here's why. But that's not who we are in the church. And the day in which that becomes who we are is the day when we stop being the church.

And that brings me to an important rule of thumb. Whenever you see somebody at Calvary or Northminster or any church anywhere who says the words I deserve you better watch out. I deserve to be an elder, I deserve to be a deacon, I deserve to preach, watch out. Because the

appropriate response to any of God's gifts is not I deserve, but I am not worthy. I am not worthy. And when people find out that we're not worthy of the gifts God gives us they may be disappointed in us, but where they are disappointed with us, they will also come to know the amazing grace of God.

What has gone done in your life that has made you say "I am not worthy?" What has God gifted you with in your life which has made you surprised at such Amazing Grace that you cried out I am not worthy. In whatever it is, I hope it is something in your life. I hope it is something in your life so that you can fully and completely know the wonders of God.