

Let us not be a hindrance or stumbling block!

Romans 14: 1-23 Do not judge another

Psalm 15

Have you ever asked yourself, ‘Am I a stumbling block to someone else’s growth in life or to their calling?’ Have you ever asked yourself, ‘Am I a stumbling block to my own path of faith and growth?’ Some of you know I have been away and saw one of my favorite bands U2 and they most recently wrote a song entitled “Get out of your own way” where the line just wouldn’t get out of my head when I looked at the scripture and it says:

*“Get out of your own way, hey, hey,
Love hurts,
Now you look out, who’s left with no words?
Your hearts a balloon, but then it bursts,
It doesn’t take a cannon just a pin,
Your skin’s not covering
And resistance,
Love has got to fight for its existence,
The enemy has armies of assistance,
The amorous, the glamorous, the kiss,
A fist, listen to this, oh
Get out of your own way’oh”*

How is it that we will get out of our own way and out of the way of each other so that the Spirit of God can move freely amongst us. So, the question today again: Have you ever or are presently being a stumbling block to yourself or someone else. So, let’s take a moment to explore Paul’s example today from the scripture in Romans, which said, “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables and those who eat must not despise those who abstain and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat for God has welcomed them. Who are you to

pass judgment on servants of another. This scripture is near and dear to my heart and many people over the years have loved to bring this up for I have been a vegetarian, I will come out of the closet, I have been a vegetarian since 1994. When I first started being a vegetarian and proclaimed this to my family I found it quite fascinating to see how people reacted. One of my favourite moments was when I was living with my grandfather who was quite the gardener and had a plethora of vegetables, but who insisted on making beef bouillon for me insisting that to be strong I needed meat. And he was not going to give up this passion and kept trying to sneak it into all sorts of things as we ate together. That was one moment. I had a second moment in my life when I was living in Belarus and there I was invited over to this person's house, she was a doctor and she had made stew for us. Turned out that it was mutton stew and I sat there and I was like "Ugh", and what I knew in that moment was that her entire monthly wage had been used to make that meal, and so every time she would go to get something else I would pass the mutton to the person sitting next to me and they would eat it because I didn't want to waste it and knew that they had put extra mutton in ours as a sign of hospitality. I did eat some of the mutton because I felt that I should. In the first example my grandfather unintentionally was a stumbling block to my choice to be a vegetarian, as I said, believing that I needed meat to be strong. In the second example though, I think that I was a stumbling block in the crossing of cultures, in the gift of hospitality.

Gilberto Collazo a theological writer, wrote a commentary on this scripture and this is what he says,

*"We are called to live in community in a way that pushes us out of our comfort zones, invites us to listen and learn from others who see things from different perspectives. In trying to hold on to our usual ways we limit the power of transformation that the gospel is constantly calling us to experience. As in any system, we are only as strong as the weaker members in our community. Paul insists that we receive into the community those who may be weak in faith and those who see things in different manners. The invitation is not to engage individuals in debate or to try to change them into what we are or think they should be, but rather to embrace all people as equals in Christ."*¹

There are two memes on social media this week that caught my attention and again I see as messages from God that really fit with Paul's message today. The first one was a picture of Jesus holding a child on his lap and people gathered around listening to his teachings and then Jesus says, 'I never told you to hate anyone. I don't care where they're from, what they look like, who they are in love with or who they worship. Why is this so difficult?' The second one I found said this; it was a picture of Jesus with a chalkboard and his disciples standing near him and he gave them a multiple-choice question. The question was this, 'They will know you are my disciples by

¹ Gilberto Collazo, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 64.

your (a) moral superiority, (b) self-righteous indignation, (c) inferior music, or (d) love for one another. And one of the disciples says, “My money is on C, inferior music.” But friends, Christianity isn’t simply a moral experience. What makes us Christians is not simply abiding by a list of rules indicating that we are good people, but as Paul was suggesting it’s about the spirit in which we interact with one another. Paul spent most of his ministry reminding people of the new commandment that we are to love one another as I have loved you. Jesus served God, not himself and not his own agenda. We like Jesus have been called to serve one another in love and not out of our own agenda to look like the perfect Christian. Jesus calls us to advocate and care for those who are oppressed in our midst. We are called to stand with the oppressed, to be their allies, but not in a way that suits our purposes. Paul goes on in Romans and says, “So let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded that in Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean. If your brother or sister are injured by what you eat you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died so do not let your good be spoken of as evil. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.”

I think judgment is one of the biggest stumbling blocks in any faith community and it happens because we focus on morality rather than the Gospel message, rather than living out the Gospel message. Learning to love our enemies, doing the work of reconciliation and living out our statement of welcome and inclusion can and will make us uncomfortable. To be inclusive according to the writers of the book *Remix: Transitioning Your Church to Living Colour*, believes that it requires faith communities to do the following three things. We need to adjust our attitudes and actions, we need to adapt existing cultural forums that may unintentionally create obstacles to inclusion and add new cultural forums and expressions of faith.²

David Bartlett another theologian had an example of this type of attitude that Paul is challenging us to adjust, and this is what he says,

“We often think that strong Christians are those who follow the clear set of rules for the right behaviour, for Paul though, the strong Christians are those who are less obviously scrupulous, and the weak Christians are the ones that follow a large list of rules.”³

So, the question remains, what else can we do to adjust to live out the statement of welcome that God has called us to? How can we work together to bridge the cultures that we are called to

² Mark DeYmaz & Bob Whitesel, *re:MIX; Transitioning Your Church to Living Color*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), p. 50.

³ David L. Bartlett, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, p. 65.

bring together in unity? How are we to bridge the beliefs and the values of different cultures and individuals so that we can live in a world that truly is peaceful and harmonious, compassionate and loving? There are two ways that I would like to introduce to you today that we will continue to explore and learn about over the next year. The two ways are this, ally ship and mutual invitation. Mutual invitation happens when you bring together a group of people from a variety of cultures; it comes with different senses of individual power. If we were to ask for volunteers, we assume that everyone in that circle has the same strong sense of their own individual power and is comfortable speaking out in a group without direct invitation. The act of inviting, invitation, is a way of giving away power. "Accepting an invitation is a way to claim power."⁴ Hospitality and inclusion will be most successful when we practice mutual invitation not assuming that each of us feel the same power. Allyship is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency and accountability with marginalized individuals or groups of people. Allyship is an active consistent and arduous process of unlearning and re-evaluating in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group. When we practice allyship it's important to first gain consent before acting, otherwise you might think you were acting in solidarity, but you could be making the situation worse.⁵ One of the other ways that faith communities can become a stumbling block is when we act on what we think people need rather than asking people directly what it is they need and want. So, practicing allyship and mutual invitation are essential practices that will help us as individuals and as a faith community to live out the welcome that Paul is suggesting and has called us to when he says, "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual unblinding. Do not for the sake of food destroy the work of God. Practising ally ship and mutual invitation will help us not be a hindrance or a stumbling block to living a life worthy of God's calling.

So, take time this week to think about, 'Am I unintentionally a stumbling block to someone else experiencing God, experiencing the divine? Have I been a stumbling block while trying to be an ally with someone who is oppressed but have ended up oppressing them more because I made assumptions. What are some of the things in my life that I need to adjust on how I speak to someone or how I interact or don't interact with someone. The diversity that exists within this world, the fact that we are starting to come together with this diversity is a gift. It's beautiful. As long as we assure that everyone participating is lifted up, held in mutual acceptance and love, where every gift is welcomed and not pushed aside. That is our calling today. So, let us go with boldness and speak truth in love. Thanks be to God.

⁴ Eric H.F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb; A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1993), p. 81.

⁵ www.theantioppressionnetwork.com