

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Stumbling: These Little Ones”

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Matthew 18:6-14

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We continue in our series “Stumbling,” which we started just last week. What I hope to explore throughout this series is something that too often stays in the shadows: doubts and struggles in the walk of faith. Too often we feel like we can’t be honest about doubts we have, struggles we face, and so we hide them, which is really tragic because we all have them.

Last week, we heard from the Gospel of Mark the story of a desperate father seeking help for his son, exclaiming to Jesus, “I believe! Help my unbelief.” And this week we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, the first of two weeks we’ll spend here in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter.

Next Sunday, I’m happy to share that we will be joined by Rev. Dr. Anne Apple, who until recently served at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis and will be with us next weekend, also leading a workshop for our officers next Saturday morning.

And what I hope we’ll find, both this week and next, in these teachings of Jesus, are both calls to account in the missteps we take but also—and maybe more importantly—a word of grace, forgiveness, and the relentless pursuit of a God who loves us. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

***<sup>6</sup> ‘If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. <sup>7</sup> Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes!***

***<sup>8</sup> ‘If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup> And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.***

***<sup>10</sup> ‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. <sup>12</sup> What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? <sup>13</sup> And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. <sup>14</sup> So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. Matthew 18:6-14***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Preschool started for the boys this past week, and last Monday was Jack’s first day. We got there a few minutes early and before the doors opened up—which, let’s be honest, probably isn’t going to happen all that often. Frances and Harry came separately to see off Jack for his first day—Harry had his first day last week too, just a different day—and they were walking up the driveway to where we were waiting. So when Jack saw his

momma and his brother coming up, he got excited. I'm like, "You just saw them 10 minutes ago." But he had already started off toward them.

From the sidewalk outside the preschool, he rounds the corner into the driveway and, not really paying attention to where he was stepping, trips over the little speedbump in the driveway, falls down, skins his knees, and comes up crying. The doting father that I am, I take Jack right to his classroom, say to Ms. Kim and Ms. Leigha, "Here you go!", thinking all the while, "Well, that didn't take long."

Jesus said after he had taken up and placed a child among his disciples, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea." All that's to say whatever genius put in that speedbump in the church driveway has some explaining to do. Nah, I'm kidding. We need those speedbumps back there. Some of y'all need to pump the brakes when you're driving back there, by the way.

Jesus kept on: "Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!" And as if to prove Jesus' point, if my son is any indication, these little ones are going to do plenty of stumbling and don't need any help from us putting things in the way.

There's been no shortage of commentary on what Jesus said about "these little ones." Who is Jesus referring to? How much is exaggeration? That sort of thing. Exaggeration is probably playing some role here, what with talk of millstones fastened around necks and cutting off hands and feet and all that. But clearly, Jesus is taking the well-being of "these little ones" very seriously. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me," that's where the millstone comes in, in v. 6. "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones," in v. 10. And finally, "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" in v. 14. According to Jesus, God takes great care to welcome and lift up these little ones, and woe be unto anyone who would impede them. So who is he talking about?

Well on one hand, at some level he's talking about children, literal little ones. If you read just before this passage, the disciples wanted to know who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So Jesus had brought a child, placed the child among his disciples, and said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Just saying that was making a statement. See, even though saying "It's for the kids" is about as safe a cause as we can muster, kind of unites people, that wasn't always the case. In those days, children weren't exactly considered an invaluable treasure. Why? Well because they weren't really seen to be contributing anything yet. They weren't old enough. They weren't big enough, strong enough. So they were considered expendable, potentially of value later on, but not yet.

Jesus flips that on its head. He places a child at the center and says one like *this*, *this* is who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, this is who God values. And on that front, who could argue with him? Everyone loves kids, right? We can all agree that we should invest in our children and support families and nurture the faith of children. It's an easy thing to agree to. And we would never do anything to cause one of these little ones to stumble, right? Easy to say, harder to do. Because these little ones are messy. They don't do the right things. They speak up when they shouldn't, and they don't do what they should. And they trip and fall *all the time*.

Now we'd *like* to think we place a high value on these little ones, but in practice it can be more than a little inconvenient to do so. And real talk now, we may not be as welcoming to "these little ones" as we might think we are. Something y'all have heard me say that I'll say again today, if you're a parent and you've got a child with you in worship of any age, I want you and your entire family to feel welcome, and whatever noises or squirming your child may want to do, it is music to the Lord's ears.

But what some of y'all might not know is what some parents have had to hear or experience otherwise. Y'all know what I'm talking about. Someone's child is making a bit of noise, nothing excessive. The parent's doing his or her best, but at some point it's a kid we're talking about, and then they get what no one wants to get. You know what it looks like. Looks like this. [Turn around, look over shoulder.] Or, even worse, after the service, they'll have someone come up to them—and y'all, this isn't theoretical, I have seen this happen—and say, "You know, we have a wonderful nursery." Now that's not everyone, and it's not all the time. But yeah, it happens, and it's not right. Now y'all, if you're a parent trying to navigate church and little kids at the same time, what impression are you going to get? Would you think that you and your family are supported in the faith? Or would you think there are obstacles in the way, stumbling blocks in the way? "Woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!" Jesus said.

Jesus teaches us here that God places a high value in his kingdom on the messy, inconvenient little ones, so much so that Christ places a child right in their midst, not off to the side. And it's a good thing, too. Heaven help us if the second we became messy or inconvenient, Jesus would set us off to the side. At one point or another, if not at all times, we're all going to be in the same boat. You see, Jesus is making a point to the disciples about "these little ones," about children, but he's also teaching them something about what it means to follow him. That phrase "these little ones," as it turns out, isn't just a reference to children. It's a term that historically was used to describe a student, a term that Jesus himself would use to describe not literal children but his disciples, his followers who were with him. It seems all this talk about stumbling and lost sheep isn't just for the kiddos. So how does this read if we're not just talking about kids? What if Jesus is talking about anyone seeking to follow him, who will inevitably be messy, inconvenient, who will trip and fall *all the time*.

Well, roughly the first half of what we read seems to be a word of personal accountability. Stumbling will happen. It's something we should be very careful not to cause for someone else, but the message seems to be: yeah, stumbling is inevitable; so let's not make it harder for someone else. And let's not be foolish or passive in what might cause us to fall. As in, if walking over a speed bump always causes you to stumble, then at some point, stop walking over speed bumps. If your hand or foot causes you to sin, as Jesus puts it, cut it off. These are words of personal responsibility and accountability. Too often we can be tempted into thinking, "Well, it doesn't matter what we do because God loves us no matter what." That's half true, dangerously half true, because God does love us no matter what, and what we should *not* do in response is think that it doesn't matter what we do. Instead, let us consider how our lives might demonstrate to others that the power and grace and love of God in Christ Jesus is at work within the world, and in that light, it matters a great deal what we do, to the point that if there is an obvious aspect of our lives that is a stumbling block for us, we don't just continue indulging the stumbling block. We address it.

Now the other way, and perhaps the more harmful way of considering this, is taking personal accountability too far. It's taking literally that command to lop off your hands and feet or tear out your eyes, because if you do the math, that gives you six total stumbles, one for each hand, foot, and eye, and after that you're immobile and blind. But more broadly, that's an understanding of a harsh God, calling us to severe self-

punishment. And too often, that's just as dangerous a trap we can fall into: thinking that because we have fallen, because we have stumbled, because we have failed in this way or that, we have run out of hands and feet and eyes to get rid of, and therefore think that we have fallen too far. And that's why I love that Jesus pairs these words of personal accountability with a word of grace, just so we don't confuse the power at work here.

If ever we start thinking, gosh, I've fallen too far, I've run out of hands and feet, here comes this word of grace, the word of a God who will leave behind the 99 in order to seek out the one, the one who still feels cut off, the one who still feels distant, the one who still isn't united with the herd or the shepherd. Maybe this sheep lost its hands, or its feet, or its eyes, or maybe thinks it doesn't belong with the rest of the flock in the first place. And what does God do? Relentlessly seeks it out. That word of relentless grace is the word that should guide us as Christians, that yes, we should seek to live righteously, but ultimately acknowledge that there is nothing that could put us so far gone that God would stop seeking us out. Is that the grace that you feel? Is that the word that you have heard? For some of us, honestly, the word we've heard all our lives has been one of, "You have to live this way or that way, and if you don't, God doesn't love you." For many, that has been the message from the church. For many, the way the lost sheep sees the rest of the flock is like, "Yeah I don't think they want me there."

I was speaking with a young man not too long ago, and at one point we start talking about matters of faith and struggle—you talk with a pastor, I mean, yeah before too long that's where the conversation is going to go. Toward the end of the conversation, as I often do, I ask how I can be praying for him. And what he shared struck me. He asked me to pray that his faith and logic would be reconciled for him, because he had big questions about whether questions of reason and science could be in harmony with a thoughtful life of faith. That was one thing he asked me to pray for. But more so than that, he asked me to pray that his faith might be reconciled with what he sees in the church—and not just our congregation, but in *the church*. Actions and words lifting up hyperbole and hatred, rather than compassion for the downtrodden.

No doubt he's not the only person with doubts, even with stumbles like that. And if that rings true for you even today, the word I hope you remember is that God will never stop seeking you out, and no matter what doubts, no matter what stumbles you may consider you have in your own life, God's not giving up on you, even and especially if the church has done a bad job of being the rest of the flock, focusing more on the hands and the feet and the eyes that other people should be getting rid of, and less on the fact that we have all at one point or another been that blind sheep left all alone, and remembering that God sought us out and brought us home.

This past week, the church lost a saint that was especially poignant at giving voice to doubt, to stumbling in the life of faith: Frederick Buechner. Some of you may know the name, and you may have even heard he passed. He was a Presbyterian minister, in fact, maybe most well known for his writing. And among the many nuggets of truth he had been inspired to share, he offered this: "An agnostic [that word we tend to think is a bad word in the church] is somebody who doesn't know for sure whether there really is a God. That is some people all of the time and all people some of the time."

So friends, no matter whether the terms of doubt or stumbling may or may not apply to you today, know that there is God seeking after you relentlessly, cutting through the underbrush, scouring the hillside, pushing aside even the mess the rest of the flock might have made along the way. And when the shepherd does bring us back and we are reunited with the flock, may we all be reminded that we are all blind sheep gathered by the grace of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.