

“Stumbling Blocks and Millstones”

I have a book that I picked up many years ago. It was written by one of my seminary professors and his father who was a Presbyterian minister. The book is called *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus*.¹ As you might imagine today's gospel reading is in there.

The first part of the reading may not so hard. The disciples are jealous that someone not in their group is casting out demons in Jesus' name so they stopped him. To put that in a more familiar context, I imagine many of us have been a position where someone outside of our group has trod on our turf. For example, when someone on another project team or in another division has an idea that affects your team we can get our back up. Isn't the first response something like, "Well, what do they know? This is not their job. Tell them to focus on their work and keep their nose out of ours." Or "Who do they think they are coming in here telling us how to do our job?" Consultants put up with that all the time.

Jesus tells them to leave the healer alone, "Whoever is not against us is for us." What is particularly interesting is just before this he says, "no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me." He is telling them that working in Jesus' name is transformative. Hang out in the church and the church will rub off on you.

The next part of the lesson is not so easy. In fact, these sayings are violent. Jesus sounds like a mobster when he suggests a millstone around the neck would be better than leading a "little one" astray. Likewise, putting out eye or chopping off a foot or hand that offends. Of course Jesus is using hyperbole when he speaks in this passage.

Jesus does not want us to harm ourselves or to be throwing people in the sea. Jesus' warning is nonetheless dire. What he tells us is that our thoughts and our actions have consequences. First of all let's think about the putting out of an eye or cutting off of a hand or foot. The eye, the hand and the foot may perform regrettable acts, but it is the mind that leads the process. The eye looks where we point it, the hand grabs what we tell it to, and the foot takes us where we tell it to go. Jesus is aware of this, but he is trying to get our attention with his command to put out and cut off the offending part.

When we fill our minds with violent or lewd images we desensitize ourselves to what we see. Our mind wants more of the same just as a junkie needs another fix of heroin. Recently, I watched some action movie clips on YouTube. I found myself wanting to see more clips from *Equalizer*, *Jack Reacher*, *Strike Back* and the like. I did not crave it so much as find myself becoming distant from it. I was examining the clips for reality of the action. What should have been frightening, horrifying, or even offensive for its gratuitousness was

¹ John T Carroll, James R. Carroll, *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* [Ada: Baker Academics, 1995].

just another video. Even when there was a moral aspect to the violence, good guys vs. bad guys, it lost that relevance and became entertainment. That is the killing and maiming of human beings was cause for my critique of the reality of the portrayal.

Needless to say I did not pluck out my eye, but I have stopped watching those clips on You Tube from my phone. Instead, I have been watching more wholesome fare. Our hands and feet are also guided by our mind. It is a matter of examining the decisions we make in the light of Jesus' calling to a life of faith and adjusting our choices to fit it. This is often not as easy as deleting an app. After all, some of our habits have long standing and may seem quite innocuous. We have to self-examine our habits of consumption, materialism, waste, media, and etc. in the light of Jesus' admonition. We endanger our health, our lives, and our futures and the lives, health and futures of other people when we are careless in our choices.

I skipped over perhaps the most important part of this reading. That is the part where Jesus admonishes his listeners not to put "a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me." I do not think there is anything more important than rearing children. As we discussed last week, children have little if any agency. They are dependent on others for food and shelter. They are also dependent on others for their formation. Children tend to accept what adults tell them about life, the universe and God. Yet so many adults act without thinking who is listening and watching and taking it all in. If we put stumbling blocks before our children we

The excuses made for Kavanaugh's purported behavior are just that, stumbling blocks. We and our children here people in positions of authority saying "boys will be boys" and "she should have known better than to go upstairs." That is, all boys are sexual predators and it was the victim's fault for going upstairs where all of the bad things happen. These people tell our boys they have the right to sexually assault girls, and that girls have to take it. It also tells girls if they go to places that are suspect they can expect to get assaulted and the boys have the right to do it.

Regardless of how we feel about this judge's nomination to the Supreme Court or whether or not he did what he is accused of, when we tolerate or repeat those aphorisms we are condoning sexual violence. We are teaching our children that these are the ways of the world. We also tell our girls that they do not have a right to report such violent behavior; that they are just to take it. In Jesus' words, we would be better off having a millstone tied around our neck and being thrown into the sea.

Culturally, ethically, and religiously we owe our children better than these tired excuses for violence. You know it, I know it, and Jesus has told us as much. We can and should do better than we have. We owe it to the little ones, we owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to Jesus.