

September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Mark 9:38-50 “Legos Aren’t the Only Stumbling Blocks”

Every time I hear this scripture, I always stop and wonder what a stumbling block is. I know what a millstone is. They’ve been around for thousands of years. Millstones are used to ground grain into flour. It’s ancient technology. The trick is you have to use heavy stones in order for the grinding action to turn hard granules into soft powder. So, if someone were to place a millstone around your neck and push you into the sea, you would sink quickly. What I don’t understand is what a “stumbling block” is. I know what yoga blocks are. And I know that it’s entirely possible for a misplaced yoga block to be a tripping hazard, but I’ve never actually stumbled over one. Yet. But I tell you what kind of blocks I have stumbled over, and that’s Legos. We’ve all heard horror stories about the sort of injuries that occur when bare feet come into contact with Legos, especially in the middle of the night. But did you know that there’s a *scientific reason* why Legos hurt so much? *Smithsonian Magazine* interviewed Scott Bell who is both a firewalker and a glass walker. Bell told *Smithsonian* that when his team fire-walks they are actually just walking in the embers of logs that burned for an hour. Although the temperature of the embers registers “between 930 and

1,100 degrees Fahrenheit,” that’s not actually what you feel when you walk across them. Glass walking is also less painful than it looks too because the broken pieces are spread evenly over a surface. As you walk across, your foot distributes weight, which flattens the glass. No one piece of glass pierces the skin or even pokes it hard enough to set off pain receptors. On the other hand, those little plastic Lego blocks are an entirely different story. These bricks are built to withstand children. In fact, as the *Smithsonian* explains, a single two-by-two block can withstand up to 4,240 Newtons, or in everyday terms about 950 pounds of pressure! So now that we have an idea about what a millstone is and what a stumbling block is, let’s figure out what Jesus might have been getting at when he said, “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 hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” Let’s see what kind of stumbling blocks we run into.

There was a man with a white-collar job, a family, and a promising future who started selling cocaine in order to fund his own addiction. He started snorting cocaine to have more energy so he could work harder to make more money to buy more cocaine. It was an all-too-familiar downward spiral. He eventually got caught and started having troubles with the law. His wife filed for divorce. As you could imagine, she got full custody of their 13-

year-old son. The guy had to work hard to convince his wife and a judge to have visitation privileges, and after a time he finally earned enough trust to get one weekend a month with his son. Things were going well for a time. The father took his son fishing and hiking ... you know, normal things that dads do with their kids. His wife was even convinced that he got a handle on his life, so she didn't worry much anymore. But one time the father got his weekends mixed up. He had planned a party on a day his son was scheduled to be with him. He decided to go ahead with it anyway. His son was old enough to know that adults had adult parties. But, as was usually the case, the party got out of hand. The father saw his son looking curiously at a bunch of grown adults snorting white powder and looking like they were having all sorts of fun. The dad said, "You want to try some?" And so, on that day, the son snorted his first line of coke. Jesus said, "Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better that a millstone was hung around his neck and be thrown into the sea."

Fred Norris, our theology professor at Emmanuel School of Religion told us about a pastor who taught the concept of "spiritual connections." He would counsel women who were having difficulties with their marriages to look deeply into their partner's eyes until they felt a "spiritual connection." This pastor would demonstrate how this concept worked and, as you can imagine, he seduced

quite a few women. Of course, he told the women that it was very important to keep this a secret. The sad thing is that this was a big, well-known church too, and the pastor was a very charismatic and influential person. Dr. Norris said that this pastor oversaw a remodel project in one of his congregations that made it easier for him to have more privacy for these “spiritual connection” sessions thus reducing the risk of anyone walking in on them. Rumors started spreading followed by lawsuits, divorces, lies and drama. Because the church was independent of any denominational structure, the minister was able to weasel his way out of these situations and into other churches around the country. And as you might guess, the whole process started over again. A lot of people left the churches he pastored and never came back because of his unethical behavior. And Jesus said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better that a giant millstone was tied to their neck and be thrown into the sea.”

I can't tell you how many times I heard stories about pastors who taught their congregations that black people were inferior, that white people were the superior race, that white blood was better than black blood, that blacks were intended to be slaves, that slavery was their God-given and Biblical destiny, that black folks lived under the curse of Ham and that the parents should pass these Biblically based teachings on to their children. And they

did. And it worked. Parents and children lived out those values for generations ... even to this day. And Jesus said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for that person to have a heavy millstone hung around their neck and be thrown into the sea.”

A lot of people are shocked when they hear or read this passage. They think, “Whatever happened to ‘Jesus meek and mild?’” What happened to the Jesus who never says anything mean about anyone except maybe the corrupt religious or government leaders of the day? This is the Son of God who loves everything and everyone and never says a harsh word to anyone, right? These words from today’s Gospel lesson are some of the harshest words in the New Testament. And it’s not like they’re ambiguous either. Jesus is pretty straightforward: If any of you causes another to sin or lead them into sin, it would be better that a millstone be put around our neck and be thrown into the sea.

So that must mean that a stumbling block is a temptation. Okay, let’s talk about temptation then. You’re going to love the Greek word for temptation. It’s “scandalon.” It’s where we get the word scandal or scandalous. It’s also a word that’s used interchangeably with “trap,” which sums up what temptation is like. Think about it - We all face temptation traps every single day. And not just once a day either. Think about how many temptations we face

in a given day, big and small. Sometimes we catch ourselves and avoid the temptation, but other times we stumble and fall on our faces.

Jesus acknowledged that stumbling blocks trip us up every day. But who are these “little ones” that Jesus refers to? This passage of scripture we read this week comes immediately after the one we studied last week, and if you remember, Jesus took a little child and placed it among the disciples and used the child as an object lesson about welcoming someone who doesn’t have anything to contribute and how that relates to welcoming God into our midst. So “these little ones” refer to children.

Children are young, naïve, and innocent of the severity of life. Children have fresh, budding minds and spirits. All of us are instinctively protective of little children who are so vulnerable and don’t know better. The contrast to vulnerable little children are adults who are responsible for their actions. In other words, we know better. Little children do not.

But the phrase, “little ones who believe in me,” can refer to those new to the faith. Any community of faith has people who are new to the faith. They know very little about God or Jesus or the values of the church. These new Christians come into the church and are often uneasy about what they don’t know about God. Think about kids who go to church camp. As squirrely as they may be, they

don't often say much about their faith or their understanding of God or Jesus or anything to do with the church. They sort of hang out on the periphery, but don't think they aren't watching. They most definitely are! Especially if they see an adult stumble and fall. These kids also take note of what happens immediately after they see one of us fall. And believe me, they notice when an adult doesn't acknowledge that they did anything wrong, or when they don't do something to right a wrong. And when they see this, it might cause *them* to stumble and fall. In some cases, they might even give up on the church because they are disappointed in the church's hypocrisy. And if you remember from a few weeks back, that's one of the two biggest reasons why people have given up on the church. Anybody ready to talk about millstones again? On the flip side of this, think about how important seasoned Christians are to someone who is exploring their faith. Think about how important it is to have folks who are mature in the faith - veterans of the church, people who have had a growing relationship with God through their faith in Christ. They're also the ones who acknowledge times when they mess up and do something about it.

Still shocked about how brutal these lessons sound? Still wondering what happened to "Jesus Meek and Mild?" Let me give you one other nugget of information that might help us better understand this story. Jesus was not

addressing the general public. Jesus was addressing his twelve disciples. Remember, this is still part of Jesus' response to their arguing about who among them is the greatest. Why were they not *getting it*? Why did Jesus have to be so blunt with his disciples? Because the disciples were the heirs of Jesus' ministry and mission. They were leaders and were held to a higher degree of accountability. See, leaders are in positions of power while disciples, students and followers in general are in positions of vulnerability. Maybe not as vulnerable as a little child, but vulnerable enough for an unscrupulous or careless leader to do significant damage when they cause another to stumble. I'm not sure Jesus would have said this to a large crowd of potential followers, but he most definitely said it to his disciples. Now before you think you're off the hook, what are we called? The Christian Church \_\_\_\_\_ of Christ. Be aware of the power that comes along with that name and be careful not to cause others to stumble.