

Stumbling Block

1 Peter 2:4-10

2/23/20

You'll soon be hearing from our Strategic Planning Team which has been working for about a year. They have been looking at the challenges facing GPC in light of the rapid overall decline in church participation throughout our country. There are a number of cultural and social shifts that have contributed to this decline, but especially among younger people, the reputation of the Christian church has taken a hit. Rather than seeing the church as a force for good, younger people are more likely to see the church as racist, sexist, judgmental, and out of touch with the realities of their lives. That's a lot for churches to overcome!

I'd like us to take a little time this morning to remember what the church is supposed to be, and to also take note of an important barrier to people's participation in church that we usually forget about. In the New Testament, several metaphors are used for the church. Paul says that the church is like a family, and like a human body. A third image for the church, that of a building, is found in I Peter. *⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.* (I Peter 2:4-5)

Here, Peter says that the church is like a building, a temple, in fact. An ancient temple was a place where a particular god lived, and where people brought sacrifices to offer to them. Peter says that the church is like that, except that the stones used to build it are living stones. We are those living stones, and we each function as priests, not offering bloody animal sacrifices to God, but spiritual sacrifices of our time and talent and money and imagination. In this image of the church, our core role is to be a place where people offer themselves to God's service. But there's more.

⁶For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,"⁸and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. (I Peter 2:6-8)

Uh oh. Here, Peter quotes from three Old Testament passages that foreshadow the world's reaction to the coming of Jesus. And it isn't pretty. Peter is continuing with the image of a building being built. Setting the cornerstone of any building must be done with great care, because all the lines of the building are tied to the stone that is placed first. So good builders would choose a cornerstone with great care, looking for just the

right size and angled shape. They would routinely reject any number of stones until they came upon just the right one.

Peter says that many people have rejected Jesus, just like a builder might reject a potential cornerstone and set it aside. But God has chosen that unlikely stone to be the cornerstone of his work on earth, and many people now trip over it. In Peter's day, the Jewish people tripped over Jesus because they expected a very different kind of Messiah- one who would be a great military leader, who would rescue them from Roman oppression, and who would be a strong nationalist, rather than a critic of their religion. Like a builder, they rejected Jesus as a cornerstone, putting him to death in the most shameful way available to them.

But Gentiles also rejected Jesus. They saw him as a backwater religious zealot who got on the wrong side of both religious and secular authorities, and was treated like a common criminal. They saw nothing in him worth their attention, so they rejected him, too.

Of course, Christians countered these critiques by pointing to God's vindication of Jesus through the resurrection, but many refused to believe. It wasn't primarily the practices of the Christian church that ancient people rejected. It was their founder, Jesus.

And I think one of the reasons people are staying away from church today is because of our founder. So, why is the Jesus we love and serve

still a stumbling block in 21st century America? I can think of three important reasons.

First, the Christian church unashamedly echoes Jesus' claim about himself. Jesus said, "*The Father and I are one.*" (John 10:30), and ⁶*Jesus said to him (Thomas), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14:6) His followers clearly understood Jesus' claim to be the only Son of God and wrote about it throughout the New Testament. The Jewish leaders understood him to say the same thing, and condemned him to death for blasphemy. Christians to this day affirm that Jesus is God, along with the Father and Holy Spirit. He is part of the Holy Trinity. That gives him unique status among religious leaders.

And that often doesn't sit right in a country like ours that is religiously pluralistic, meaning that we are a nation comprised of people with a wide variety of faiths, or no faith at all. I would argue that this is a strength of our nation. But our pluralism has morphed into a kind of religious relativism or agnosticism so that many believe that any religion is as good as any other, or that we certainly can't know that one religion is truer than another.

You've probably heard the parable of the three blind men describing an elephant. The first man, feeling the side of the elephant declares that an elephant is wide and covered with a rough hide. The second, feeling

the tusk, disagrees, saying that an elephant is hard, smooth, and pointed. And the third, grabbing the trunk, insists that an elephant is cylindrical and flexible. The moral of the story is that each of the three has only a portion of the truth, and that each is equally correct and incorrect at the same time. This parable is often applied to the world's religions, asserting that each religion has only a portion of the truth.

Into this kind of skeptical thinking about religion drops Jesus' absolutist claims- that he alone is God's Son and that only by believing in him can we come into God's love and forgiveness, as we read earlier in the service in John 3:16. Now Christians actually agree with the point of the parable of the elephant- that human beings, left on our own, are very limited in what we can learn about God and God's work on earth. But we believe that God broke into human history on that first Christmas and revealed to us what God is really like when he sent his Son, Jesus, into the world. He lived among us and died for our sins.

Our belief about Jesus being God in the flesh is a stumbling block to many in progressive, Western cultures like ours. It's what theologian Leslie Newbigin calls the "scandal of particularity." Many prefer a more democratic, nebulous, spiritual approach to religion rather than building it all on the life and death of a 1st century Palestinian Jew.

But that's not the only thing about Jesus that people stumble over. They also stumble over his radical ethical teachings. Jesus said we're supposed to love everyone- even our enemies! How is that even possible? Personal enemies- people who have it in for you and want to see you fall? National enemies who are out to harm us? We're supposed to love them? And we're not permitted to take revenge? Really? And, we're supposed to forgive people many, many times? And to control our anger-in this anger-saturated culture? And to control our lust in a society that celebrates lust in every imaginable way? And if we have two coats, to give one away to someone who needs it more? That doesn't sound like good capitalism to me! These teachings are hard for people to hear and to want to do! They are hard for Christians to hear and do! And we stumble over them.

Besides that, people stumble over Jesus' theological teachings, too, particularly his radical notions of grace! In the parable of the Prodigal Son, a young man, who had treated his father like he was dead and squandered his inheritance, is welcomed back like some kind of long-lost celebrity! How is that fair? Another parable tells the story of workers who labored different numbers of hours, yet all received the same payment because the owner wanted to treat them all the same! Jesus asserted, and Paul followed, that we are made right with God, not by any good things that we

might do, but because of God's love for us in spite of our actions. Our job is to quit trying to impress God, and rely on his gracious offer of salvation.

Some people hate that. They were told since they were young that they had to earn their way by their hard work or intelligence. And many people believe that they've always tried to do their best, that they've worked hard, that they've given to charity, that they've been a good parent or spouse, maybe even been active in a church- and that should be enough to gain God's favor. They don't need any charity! They think they've pulled themselves up by their own spiritual bootstraps! They stumble over Jesus' teaching that this isn't enough, and that every single one of us is dependent on the grace of God alone to make us right with God.

So, people stumble over Jesus today because of his exclusivist claims about his identity, because of his ethical teaching, and because of his theological teaching. He's still a stumbling block. And he's the reason some people avoid church today. So, what do we do about it?

You may have seen the BBC TV show, "Britain's Lost Masterpieces," in which art expert, Bendor Grosvenor (Grove-nor), looks for misattributed artwork that was actually painted by a master. A few years ago, while looking at other artwork at an estate in Scotland, he spotted a small painting tucked away in a corner, hanging over a door. It was a Madonna, attributed to a minor painter and valued at a few thousand dollars, but

Grosvenor thought it might be something special. He convinced the owners to allow him to have it restored, and after removing layers of varnish and dirt and doing a number of tests, determined that it was a painting by the Italian master, Raphael, worth around \$26 million dollars!

Many people had viewed this painting over the centuries, but they had not seen what was really there and had, in essence, rejected it as having no significant value. But closer examination revealed its true character and value. Many people are rejecting the church today, along with its founder, Jesus. Part of our job is to help people take a second look at Jesus so they can see his real character and value, so they can see why we've committed our lives to him. How in the world do we do that effectively today? That's a great question! And we'll talk about it in next week's sermon! I hope you'll be here!