

Proper 21, Year B

- Gospel of Mark - written to community divided - poss. Gentile and Jewish Christians? -
- One thing we know is that it's likely part of his purpose in writing the Gospel was to try to hold the community together - remind them that as Christians, they may come from different places or even have different beliefs, but ultimately, they all served one master
- That desire, that purpose, is esp. clear in passages like this one
- When John and the other disciples see someone casting out demons, essentially doing good works - but they tell that person to stop because he wasn't following them - them meaning the disciples
- And just like he has the past several weeks, Jesus rebukes the disciples a bit - if he's doing good things in my name, then he must be with us, with me - no matter if he said he's following you or not
- "Whoever is not against us is for us," Jesus says
- And then he goes on to talk about stumbling blocks - and cups of water
- "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."
- And then, later, "For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."
- So I too would like to talk this week about stumbling blocks - and about cups of water
- But first, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that this was a rather momentous week for Grace, and for me - Wed. was Renewal of Ministry with the Welcoming of a New Rector - celebration of ongoing ministry of Grace, and a service that really was a ritual welcoming me to this community - grateful to everyone who took part in making it such a celebration
- But due to the national news cycle it was a difficult week in other ways, for a lot of people
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- When writing this sermon, debated whether or not to even bring this up - and I'm sure there are people wondering if I'm really about to talk about the Supreme Court hearings
- Before I say anything, though, I want to tell you all one of the things that I told the search committee when they were interviewing me about the rector position at Grace:
- I strongly believe that the Gospel is not partisan, although it does certainly sometimes have political implications - I think that if and when we vote, God cares a great deal more about why we vote than how we vote

- In other words, I am not here to preach the Gospel according to the Republican Party, or the Gospel according to the Democratic Party - I have no intention of preaching about Brett Kavanaugh or Christine Blasey Ford
- But when I think about stumbling blocks and cups of water, there can't be a much better illustration than the confirmation hearings this past week - maybe even all the moreso because they're such a controversial issue
- Because after this week, a lot of people I know are hurting - basically all the women in my life, all the women I know and care about are hurting
- They're hurting... because these hearings have forced them to remember and confront those times when they've been harrassed, made to feel uncomfortable, or worthless, or violated
- And they've had to confront the fact that systems in which they've trusted have either used or ignored their stories, leaving them by and large with the impression that our government this week seemed more interested in political wins than in their inherent dignity and well-being — and not for the first time, either
- I mention this because of how hurtful such an impression can be when it's received from those who are ostensibly followers of Christ, those who have seemingly answered the call to love God and love their neighbor - it is particularly damaging when Christians are too busy cheering on their team, their political party, to reflect the grace of God to the world
- That is exactly what Jesus means by “stumbling blocks”
- There is a seriousness to the responsibility that we all have - we are not merely followers of Christ, but we are Christ's ambassadors to the world - when people see Christians, they see Christ, for good or for ill
- If our Christianity is indecipherable from politics as usual in the country, if our loyalty to Christ is set aside for partisan loyalties, then we are putting stumbling blocks in each others' ways - we become obstacles, around which others cannot even catch a glimpse of God
- If we are more concerned with chalking up another political victory than we are with treating everyone - regardless of who they are or who they claim to follow - with the dignity that is theirs by virtue of them being beloved children of God - then Jesus has rather harsh words for us, just as he did for his own disciples, those closest to him, who devoted their lives to him and yet were still capable of missing his point, of misunderstanding his message

- That's part of human nature - we all do things that are ungodly, even those considered closest to God
- But all the same, Jesus does not mince words in his condemnation of putting stumbling blocks in anyone's path to God
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- But thankfully, Jesus has more than just harsh words
- He also says to the disciples, somewhat startlingly, "For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."
- It's kind of amazing, isn't it, that Jesus would choose such a simple gesture in contrast with the almost exaggerated "putting a stumbling block" in someone's way?
- If we know what it looks like to put a stumbling block in someone's way, then what does it mean to bring a cup of water?
- In this case, Jesus doesn't seem to be asking much of us, to be his followers
- A simple gesture of kindness, just reaching out, to try to connect with each other - a recognition that every one of us has dignity, is a beloved child of God - a small symbolic gesture of reconciliation
- It's like Jesus is telling us, "it doesn't have to be complicated - even the smallest acts of kindness can go a long way"
- Don't put stumbling blocks in each others' way - bring each other cups of water - there is healing there, in water, in the offering of a cup
- Reminds me of my favorite part of the Renewal of Ministry Service Wednesday:
- Presented with a flask of oil for healing, and the response the service prescribed was this one: "Amen. Live without fear: your creator has made you holy, loves you eternally, and reconciles you to one another."