

September 9, 2018  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18, Year B, RCL  
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22  
Psalm 124  
James 5:13-20  
Mark 9:38-50

At least ten years ago, I realized this about myself: I *really* don't want to fall ever again. These days, I don't even want to stumble. As time goes by, I have to be ever more careful not to.

I'm not as nimble as I used to be. A small impediment is more likely to make me stumble. If I stumble, I'm more likely to go down. And if I go down, I'm more likely to get hurt. You might say that, as the years have gone by, I have become more susceptible to the effects of stumbling blocks.

My tripping hazard is not necessarily *yours*. Every person is unique. Each of us necessarily views the landscape from our own perspective and experiences it with our own body. A particular feature of the landscape has a different effect on each different person who encounters it. One person's *amusement* is another's *nuisance* is another's *danger*. Return to that particular feature of the landscape later in life, and your own experience of it might be very different.

Jakki and I have been watching the television program *The Great British Baking Show*. If you haven't seen it, it's like *Survivor* for people who love to bake. Each season begins with twelve amateur bakers. Two judges remove one contestant per episode until there is a winner. Each episode culminates in that week's "Showstopper Challenge." In the "Showstopper Challenge," the remaining contestants are tasked to create a baked centerpiece that is a delight to the eyes as well as to the taste buds. The results are usually over the top in ways I could never have imagined. Chocolate is often involved.

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus hears concern that the "wrong people" are healing others in his name. Jesus says to let them continue. He adds, you might say, that their "right actions" make them the "right people." He goes on to imply that interference would be akin to placing a stumbling block before other believers. Those "wrong people" are bringing others into the fullness of God's love. To stop them would be to place an impediment to those others' experiences of God. We understand the gravity of such an offense by the sternness of his warning.

To use a different metaphor, you might say that God is throwing a feast, a feast at which everyone is welcome, no matter how they get there. At God's feast, the table is straining under the weight of every showstopper from *The Great British Baking Show*. But the most extraordinary showstopper in the world is as nothing if no one is present to consume it. The proof of the pudding is in the *eating*.

In today's Gospel and elsewhere, we hear that Jesus just wants to fill all the seats at God's table, but the disciples keep getting hung up on the details: who gets an invitation, how the invitation is delivered, and what the tickets cost. They would have a seating chart and a bouncer to enforce it. Details like that are stumbling blocks that have nothing to do with Jesus and nothing to do with God.

Jesus wants them and us to get it right, and quickly. After all, the healing Jesus brings isn't just about life in the next life. Jesus heals in real time. God's feast is happening, right now. We're invited to the table, right now. Everyone is invited to eat, right now. People are experiencing the effects of stumbling blocks, right now.

For many women, this has been a very tough news week. It's not only or even primarily about the individuals in the news. It's about the untold numbers of unnamed others. It's about women, and also about children and people of color and poor people, and ... fill in the blank. Here's what I think is the core of the issue: people with more power visiting violence upon the bodies of those with less power. It's an old story, an old story to which we are awakening anew.

This is not only or primarily a political issue; rather, it's a spiritual one, with broad ramifications. The individual perpetrating such violence leaves behind for their target a massive stumbling block to the fullness of life in God. Jesus warns over and over again about the use and abuse of power. He describes a renewed world in which the weak become powerful and the powerful become weak. As a community of faith, as people who follow Jesus, we must be concerned—about the future and with the here and now, about the individuals directly involved and with the ways we are all affected. It *is* a spiritual issue.

We've been hearing this week about what has been termed "bro culture." It would be disingenuous and even dangerous to pretend that that "bro culture" isn't real and alive and well. That is just one facet of a multifaceted and deep-seated structure of sin, one that places power in maleness and power in whiteness and power in wealth. It allows some to leave stumbling blocks before others, who have been and continue to be dis-advantaged—physically, mentally, and spiritually—by the effects. Jesus calls us to be aware of all the ways in which our culture rewards some at the expense of others. Jesus calls us to be agents of God's healing.

The Good News of Jesus Christ isn't that the stumbling blocks don't exist. The Good News is that those stumbling blocks are not God's way, and are in fact the opposite of God's way. The Good News is that the Kingdom of God, those stumbling blocks will be pulverized. The Good News is that, with God's help, we can help. The Good News is that the Kingdom of God is here, if not yet in its fullness, and therefore the pulverizing is underway. This is true even if it doesn't always seem like it, and even when we doubt it.

For many of us, simply watching the news this week has been a stumbling block. Through the lens of discouragement, God's feast has felt very far away. And so we come here, to a place where God often seems very near. We give one another a hand, and pick one another up, so that we all can all get to the feast, and imagine a world where everyone does.

The purpose of our Sunday worship is not to create a weekly “showstopper.” Sometimes we do, but that’s not really the point. In worship, we create a location apart, one out of time and place. We do this not to ignore the world, but so that we can return to the world, strengthened and renewed.

I have stumbled. I don’t want to fall, ever again, literally or metaphorically. But I will. I know I will. The metaphorical stumbling blocks are just as real as this pulpit and this altar. And the thing is, compared to the literal falls, the metaphorical ones are by far the farther and the harder and the more painful.

I know what it will look like: I will get caught up in the way I am going, and I will *not* see the rock that has dropped in my path, and I will trip, and I will fall, and I will know I am falling, and I will dread the moment I hit the ground, and I will hit the ground, and the breath will be knocked out of me, and I will lie there, looking up at the sky, trying not to cry. The older I am the more I know about pain; therefore, it will hurt worse than ever.

Yes, I will fall, again, and maybe you will, too. If you do, here is what I can say from past experience: though it might not feel like it, God is with you. The Holy Spirit is there to restore your breath; Jesus Christ is there to lift your damaged body; God our Mother is there to tell you how much she loves you.

Jesus has set the table; God’s feast is ready. The showstoppers *have* been prepared and are waiting, for *you*, and for the world.