

September 7, 2014

Matthew 18:15-20 Romans 13:8-14

"Stepping Stones or Stumbling Blocks"

Years ago, the late Corrie ten Boom became famous through the book and film, "The Hiding Place," which tell of her family's efforts to hide Jews in Holland from the Nazis and of her later suffering in a Nazi death camp. In 1947, she returned to visit that death camp in Germany, where she gave a message of forgiveness to a group of German people who had come out to hear her. It was this visit that provided her with one of the most difficult tasks she ever faced, as recorded in her book, *Tramp For the Lord*.

"The place was Ravensbruck and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard - one of the most cruel guards. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: 'A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!'

"And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course - how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

"But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"'You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,' he was saying. 'I was a guard there.' No, he did not remember me. 'But since that time,' he went on, 'I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,' - again the hand came out - 'will you forgive me?'

"And I stood there - I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven - and could not forgive. My sister had died in that place - could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?....It seemed hours as I stood there, wrestling with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do."

Corrie ten Boom's story is "touchable," for we have tasted similar dilemma, and we can understand her pain and the struggle of her moment. Truly she faced a challenge to even consider forgiving the man for the hurt he had wrought. And yet, her Christianity told her to forgive him. Her Christianity made her know that she also stood in need of forgiveness. Her Christianity called her not to stumble over her resentment, but to move forward into a new set of risks and joy in God's undeserved mercy.... All this having been said, I wonder how any one of us might have responded to that man. Would we have taken his hand and given him assurance of a clean slate? Should we have?

The Christian life is not an easy or clear path to follow. It is full of opportunities that become either stepping stones or stumbling blocks. The scripture for today takes things even a few steps beyond Miss ten Boom's struggle, for it did not have Jesus telling folks to grudgingly (or otherwise) hand

out pardons if a guilty person approached with a sincere plea for such. Rather, Jesus suggested something more radical! Jesus taught that if another Christian wrongs you, you must not wait for that person to realize it and feel bad about it and finally come to you door with a nice gift and a hearty repentance; instead, you must go immediately to the wrongdoer and tell them your side of things and offer him/her the opportunity to "get right" with you! OUCH! The burden is placed first not on the wrongdoer, but on the one who has been wronged to take the first step toward reconciliation!!

Hear again these difficult words of Jesus: "If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you... and if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or tax collector..."

Today's lesson included some other difficult teachings of Jesus: "So I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven." and,

"Whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them."

Now what are we to make of these sayings? Clearly the concern of this portion of the Gospel of Matthew is how Christians are to carry out their life and govern themselves, particularly in terms of reconciliation and discipline. Christians were (and are) to hold themselves to a higher standard than did the rest of the world. They were to respect earthly authority, since, as Paul told the Romans, every morsel of anybody's authority exists only because God has permitted it. But the Christian's primary concern must be to love God by loving one another (Romans 13:8). The importance of tending to love within the community is exemplified in Jesus' teaching about seeking reconciliation. When these guidelines are followed, there is no room for grudges or harbored resentments. In fact, taking Jesus' teaching seriously would really mess up a lot of the typical church's existing patterns of operating!

How many folks do you know who once attended a church, perhaps regularly, but then had their feelings hurt, and left or drifted away? Probably every one of us knows someone. But if Jesus' teaching had been utilized, there could have been no festering; there would have been no unspoken complaints allowed to fester into inactivity. And the church family would have remained much more intact, even as it had to deal with sometimes harsh realities of disagreements and pain. But what a difference!!! Jesus' teaching is a stumbling block when it is ignored. It is a stepping stone to more faithful life as a congregation when it is followed.

Now I share a story, one that Mark and I each brought here this morning. I do not know the original author; it is found in lots of books and Internet sites. Here it is: *Once upon a time, there were two brothers. Their father had a large farm, and when he became too old to work it, he said to his sons: "I am too old to work any more, so I will divide this farm and give each of you half. I know that you*

will always work together and that you will always be good friends.”

Things went well for a while as the brothers worked on their adjoining farms. They were the best of friends and would share everything together. But then, one day, they had a disagreement and the brothers stopped speaking to each other. For many years not a word was spoken between them.

One day, one of the brothers was at his house when a carpenter came to his door asking if he had any jobs for him to do. The brother thought for a moment and then said, “I would like for you to build a fence on my property. Build it down near the stream there that separates my farm from my brother’s, and make it a high one, for I don’t want to see my brother any more. I am going into town and will be back this evening.”

When the brother came back that evening, he was shocked to see that the carpenter had not followed his instructions. Instead of building a high fence there, the carpenter had built a bridge over the stream. As the brother walked down to take a look at the bridge, his brother walked toward him from the other side, exclaiming, “After all the terrible things I have done to you over the years, I cannot believe that you would build a bridge and welcome me back!” He reached out to his brother and gave him a big hug.

The first brother then walked back up to his farmhouse and asked the carpenter, “Can you stay? O have more work for you to do.” The carpenter replied, “I’m sorry, but I cannot stay. I have to go, for I have many other bridges to build.”

Love one another. That's the first concern of God. Remember that any power or authority we have as God's people comes only from God, before whom we all stand lacking. It's easy to grab hold of the most familiar part of today's lesson, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them," and use it to justify whatever we happen to end up doing. But "in my name" means a lot more than simply tacking the phrase "in Jesus' name" at the end of our wish list!! "In my name" meant in Jesus's day one who served as representative for another; one who sought to carry out the other's will; one who proceeded by the other's authority.

People of the church, we are given a hard challenge! We need to let Christ's teachings be for us stepping stones in vital, living, loving, serving faith! We need to claim this scripture as a mandate for ourselves, to be sure that in our meetings and our weekdays as well as holy day businesses we are seeking God's way, God's authority, God's guidance as to what really is love for others.

Corrie ten Boom could finally reach out her hand because she trusted the life God offers more than she had to hold onto the pain of what this man had done. She did so to keep her pathway clear for God's work. She did so in blind faith.

Years ago I saw a baby, screaming at the top of its lungs because it wanted to nurse its mother. She needed to rearrange its position a bit so as to be able to nurse it, and tried to, but the baby held onto her shirt so tightly that there was no way this could be accomplished. If only the baby could have understood that by relaxing its fists it could help itself get what it wanted and needed.... We tend to

be not so different with God, especially in terms of our ability to forgive others and our willingness to really put ourselves in God's hands.

But that is what we are called to do and to risk, as individuals and as a congregation. We are called to trust God. We are called to live God in a culture that considers God generally unnecessary. And what's more, we are called to go all out to work for reconciliation, so that the Body of Christ will be whole and uninhibited by fretting and discordance to minister to this world in Christ's name.

If anybody else were God, the whole thing would fall apart, because it is a fact that we do and always will stumble along the way! But the One who calls us knows us, inside and out, and enables even our most feeble reaching out in faith to become healthy strides into new life in Christ. It's not easy, but it is essential.

May we learn to forgive. May we learn to offer opportunities for reconciliation when we are wronged. May our hearts become clear enough to receive God's love and forgiveness for ourselves and for others. Bridges instead of walls, stepping stones instead of stumbling blocks. All because of God who is with us and calls us forward into life, now and forever! Thank God! Amen.