

PENTECOST 17B/LECTIONARY 26

September 27, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 Psalm 19:7-14 James 5:13-20 ***Mark 9:38-50***

Stumbling blocks.

In today's Gospel reading, a continuation from last week, Jesus is with the twelve. John says, “Hey, we saw this guy casting out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he's not a member of our group.” And Jesus tells him – and the rest – “Don't stop anyone who's ministering in my name!”

Then Jesus begins to teach again. He sees John's complaint about this unnamed minister as the disciples trying to draw lines to determine who's in, and who's out. And once again, Jesus' harshest words are reserved for those who are supposedly on the inside – this time, the twelve. He says: “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.”ⁱ In other words, don't stand in the way of those acting in faith, and receiving in faith.

As we begin our annual financial stewardship emphasis today, I'd like for us to spend some time dwelling on this notion of stumbling blocks. Simply put, stumbling blocks might be those things that separate us from God.

While it's true that others may put stumbling blocks in front of us, I often wonder if the biggest stumbling blocks we have to overcome in our relationship with God are those we put there ourselves? What things in our lives prevent us from keeping our focus on God and Godly things? Or, as Martin Luther put it, what idols or little “gods” do we create in our own lives that become the focus and push God out of the center?

For the next four weeks we'll be spending some concentrated time talking about our financial stewardship. Today we begin with the theme “Following Jesus,” and what this means in relationship to all the things that God has given us to manage in this life. The question for us today is: When is enough enough?

A good starting place might be with the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. In his *Small Catechism* Martin Luther explains this Commandment by saying that “We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.”ⁱⁱ He expands upon this in his *Large Catechism*:

You shall have no other gods.

That is, you shall regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What is to have a god? What is God?

Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.ⁱⁱⁱ

Luther later goes on to say:

Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god — mammon by name, that is, money and possessions — on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if he were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, he who has nothing doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God.⁴

Luther is right: Money and possession are quite often the number one idol we put in place of God. I'm reminded of a trip John Mark and I took several years ago to Mexico. One day we took a Mayan sightseeing and educational tour. Our guide began by telling us that, contrary to popular belief, the Mayans are not extinct. In fact, he was married to a Mayan lady. He then proceeded to tell us about modern-day Maya.

One of the things that stuck with me most was when we passed by a Mayan home. It was a cinder-block building, a single room probably no larger than our own chancel area. The guide pointed to that building, and the children playing outside and said, "Look. You may see that Mayan family and think that they are living in the worst kind of poverty. But they have enough to eat, they have a roof over their heads, and the children are happy. Maybe they are happier because they don't want a whole lot of extra things. What they have is enough, and they are happy."

As I've been thinking about this experience during the past week, I've thought about a whole lot of experiences from my own life. I remember when I was in high school. I went to a very prestigious college prep school. But I wasn't like most of the students at that school. I didn't come from a wealthy family; I was a scholarship and work-study student. Most of the kids there had a whole lot of things I didn't have. This was the '80s, during the height of the preppy fashion trend. One of the things I wanted most was to be able to dress like everyone else. I wanted a Ralph Lauren Polo shirt. But even in the '80s those cost about \$60. My grandmother sent me a \$30-a-month allowance. I saved and saved, and finally one day bought my Polo shirt. I wore it as often as I possibly could, with the hope that others wouldn't notice it was the same shirt I was wearing over and over again. But the funny thing was, that newness quickly wore off, then I had to have the next newest status symbol – I think it was a Walkman. And when I finally got that, it was on to the next thing. There just never seemed to be enough.

Fast forward to 1990. John Mark and I had recently entered the Army and were getting ready to move to Germany. But we had a whole lot of credit card debt. We'd bought a whole lot of stuff, probably most of which we didn't need. I called the bank to get a signature loan to pay off this debt before we left. The man on the phone gave me one of the most valuable pieces of advice I've ever received. He said that people who get signature loans to pay off debts rarely end up debt-free; they usually just go out and pile up more debt. Obviously, I remembered his advice, and it changed our lives. We resolved to buy only that which we could afford without going into debt.

Fast forward again to 1998. John Mark and I were moving to Virginia. As we set about finding a home to buy, the bank qualified us for a loan of a certain amount. But we decided that we didn't need as much house as that amount would buy; we looked at houses that cost only half as much and that had the amount of space we needed. Our realtor just couldn't understand this, and actually, I think she was a little mad at us for not spending to our limit. But in the end this was a very good decision. When we sold that house in 2006 the housing bust was just beginning. If we had bought to our limit we would have taken a horrible loss at sale. By only buying what was enough we were saved from financial ruin.

When we moved to New Jersey in 2006, we once again moved into housing assigned to us by the government, a townhouse. We had hoped for more, but truth be told, our current townhome is still more than enough. It meets all our needs.

But it's been ironic to watch the behavior of some of our neighbors. For a couple of years we had families living on our street who seemed to be engaged in a constant game of one-upsmanship. One would get a new car, then a couple of weeks later another one would get a new car. When these two were out on the weekend washing and waxing their new cars, someone else would drive up in a brand new car. You could see the looks of shock and dismay on their faces. These people seemed to do this with all sorts of possessions, whether it be who had the best landscaping or who owned the newest and best TVs or tech gadgets. As I'm sure most of you know, keeping up with the Joneses can be quite expensive. I've often wondered if these people put much, if any, thought into what of their futures they were sacrificing for this present covetousness, idolatry and pride? Did they understand that each new car might represent at least a couple of semesters of college for one of their kids? I doubt it.

When John Mark and I left for vacation on the 4th we took our regular limo service to the airport. Since John Mark travels so much we know our driver, Frank, pretty well. On the way we started talking about the possibility of John Mark getting assigned to bigger and better housing. And Frank said, “Yeah, but look – I know you two well enough to know that that kind of stuff isn't important to you. It's important to other people, but not you.”

I wish I could live up to Frank's saintly perception of me! But the truth is, I really would like to have a bigger, nicer house. I often find myself gazing longingly at some of the nice houses I see.

I'm no different than anyone else in this acquisitive culture of ours. I've been indoctrinated that having more stuff is better, that it's somehow a measure of how successful one is in life. It's a constant battle to remind myself of what's enough. It's a struggle nowadays to make it simple, when everyone else is trying to keep up with the Joneses. It takes conscious decisions to keep money and possessions in their proper place. They won't be my stumbling blocks. Following Jesus demands that I always remember who ultimately owns *me*, the God whose proper place is in the center of each of our lives, and not some idol of our own making.

Amen.

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- i Mark 9:42
 - ii Tappert, T. G. *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, The Small Catechism: I, 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).
 - iii Tappert, T. G. *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, The Large Catechism: 1, 1-3 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).
 - 4 Tappert, T. G. *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, The Large Catechism: 1, 5-9 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).