

# Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, September 29, 2024

“Us vs. Them?”

## *Young at Heart Message*

Have you ever experienced a stumbling block to your faith?

I have experienced several throughout my life.

The first stumbling block that I can recall - and perhaps the most impactful for a variety of reasons – happened when I was maybe 12 years old.

I didn't go to Sunday school for some reason, and my cousin, who was the same age as me and also in my Sunday school class, told me that I was going to go to hell because I missed Sunday school.

I was distraught. I couldn't understand how something out of my control would automatically doom me to hell.

It didn't make sense. So I asked the smartest person I knew at the time – my Dad.

And I distinctly remember my Dad laughing when I told him about it.

Here I was, practically in tears, worried about my soul and wondering how I could be doomed so early in life.

I was probably the only kid in the world to commit myself to hell so soon in life.

And my Dad laughed.

But then he told me that if I was going to hell for something like that, then we were all going to hell for some reason or another.

And then he probably said something more about hell, but I don't remember anything after that.

I just remember that he had assured me that I was not, in fact, going to hell.

But this scenario was a huge stumbling block to faith and religion and my path to God.

I didn't know much about God or Jesus, but what I did know was that I had been taught that Jesus loved me. God loved me.

And if I was so loved by God, then how could a God who loved me be so flippant about condemning me to hell (or making people believe that other people were condemned to hell)?

Now of course, my cousin probably doesn't remember this at all. And I can't blame her for this – she was just repeating something she'd been taught at some point.

She wasn't old enough to know any more than I did on the subject of God or hell.

But this was a stumbling block for me, nonetheless.

I have had other stumbling blocks in my life, too.

My natural curiosity and my propensity to ask questions and be skeptical of the answers I received turned me away from organized religion for a large chunk of my life.

But it also allowed me to spend many years asking questions, understanding what it means to love our neighbours as ourselves, and to approach God with wonder and awe.

I was free to explore, to stumble, and to be curious and open-minded, not just about religion but about God, about other people, and about myself.

Most of us have probably experienced at least one stumbling block to our faith in our lives.

An experience, a comment, something you read or heard, or something that just didn't seem to jive with what you were taught when you were growing up.

Those stumbling blocks helped formed your faith as much as the things you've learned in church, in Sunday school, or in the world.

We meet Jesus and the disciples today at the precise moment when the disciples experience quite a large stumbling block.

### ***The Message***

The disciples see a man helping people in the name of Jesus. But John says "he wasn't one of us, so we told him to stop."

Jesus then basically says “what?! Why would you stop someone from helping people just because they aren’t ‘one of us’?!”

The disciples are essentially separating themselves from everyone else.

They are implying that *only* people who are in their folds can do what they do.

If we look closely, John said “he wasn’t one of *us*.” The stumbling block they are experiencing is an “us vs. them” mentality.

And Jesus sets them straight by telling the disciples that just because someone isn’t walking with them directly doesn’t mean that the person can’t be doing good work and spreading good news in the world.

Humans can be very skilled at stumbling blocks, which isn’t necessarily something we would *want* to try to be skilled at.

Sometimes stumbling blocks are put in our path through no fault of our own, but often, especially when it comes to faith, we create our own stumbling blocks. And sometimes, we put stumbling blocks in the paths of others.

My cousin put a huge stumbling block along my faith journey without knowing it.

Which is exactly what the disciples do here. They started to think of themselves as “better than” or “more than” *them*.

And of course *them* is anyone who isn’t in their tight circle of followers.

So not only do they create their own stumbling block, but they drop this stumbling block onto the path of the person they told to stop simply because he wasn’t “one of them.”

How often do faithful Christians do these types of things to others, and by extension to themselves, I wonder?

How many of you have either believed that your denomination or religious tradition is the one and only “right” way, or know someone who has been taught that or believes it currently?

I know I have heard that, and I know people who believe it.

But Jesus uses some strong words to caution us against such notions of “us” vs. “them.” He cautions us against this idea that *we* are somehow better than *them*.

I am not, and will never be, a fire-and-brimstone, put-the-fear-of-God-into-you preacher.

That doesn't feel like good news to me. If anything, it feels like bad news meant to scare you into running toward Jesus, rather than good news intended to remind you that Jesus's arms are always open for you.

And I don't think Jesus is a hellfire preacher either.

So why does he offer such strong words to the disciples here, and why does he talk about hell?

I think we need to put his language into the larger context of his entire life and teachings.

What does that mean? I think we need to read Jesus's language as spoken with all the love and compassion in the world.

The disciples want to "copyright" their work, and the work of Jesus, so that only they own the rights to him and his work.

As far as stumbling blocks go, that's a huge one because Jesus wants the exact opposite – he wants his message to get out to as many people as possible. He doesn't want it limited to only a few who are "allowed" to share the message.

Putting themselves between people and Jesus to gatekeep is exactly the opposite of what Jesus wants.

This behavior only limits what should be open and available to everyone.

The disciples had good intentions, but ultimately, all their actions did was turn someone away from Jesus.

So Jesus feels like he needs to use some pretty harsh language with the disciples, but it ultimately comes from a place of love – not just love for them, but love for all those people who are following outside of the inner circle.

He tells the disciples that placing these stumbling blocks in the paths of others – "causing even one of my followers to sin" he says – would be terrible.

Just don't do it, guys. Come on. It would be better for you to not follow me at all than it would for you to cause someone to turn away from me.

So, Jesus says, if part of you is causing you to sin, do away with it (metaphorically). It would be better to go into God's kingdom with only one eye, for example, than to keep both eyes but be thrown into hell.

In other words, don't allow yourself to get caught up in these antiquated notions of "us" vs. "them." Don't allow yourselves to believe that you are better than others when all they're trying to do is follow me, too.

No one owns the good news. Not the disciples, not any one denomination, and not even the “big C” Church.

Jesus is reminding us that humility is important, and as much as we’d like to think so, we don’t know everything.

So let’s set aside any thoughts that we do know it all.

If the disciples teach us anything throughout the Gospels, it’s that they were *far* from perfect. And they had direct access to Jesus!

So there is no way we have perfect faith, either. So let’s not assume we do.

Jesus ends this passage by saying “Salt is good. But if it no longer tastes like salt, how can it be made salty again?”

In other words, if we stumble, or if we start placing stumbling blocks in the paths of others, how can we get back onto our own path and stop hindering others?

Jesus has an answer for that, too. “Have salt among you and live at peace with each other.”

There’s more than enough salt to go around. Have your salt, but don’t prevent others from having theirs, too.

Live at peace with each other.

One of my teachers this semester for my discernment class says “be at ease.”

Friends, be at ease. Live at peace with each other.

Don’t worry about who’s right and who’s wrong.

Jesus shares such good news with us, and his arms are open wide especially for each of us.

Not just for us individually, but for *all*.

It’s not necessary to scare anyone into loving Jesus.

Jesus’s arms are lovingly open wide for everyone, no matter how many times we might stumble. Amen.

Let us pray:

God of compassion, thank you for guiding us and loving us through our stumbling blocks. Thank you for helping us be more aware of the stumbling blocks we place

for ourselves, and for others. We are grateful for the disciples of Jesus, who show us time and time again how to live out our faith in ways that are healthy and loving, both to ourselves and others. Thank you for continuing to open your loving arms to us each and every day. Amen.