

18th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermon 9.27.15

Scripture: Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Mark 9:38-41

Last month, the folks over at the library borrowed the church's tables for their fundraising book sale, as they have every year for as long as I can remember. Next month, the church will gather for worship on the library lawn for our first (perhaps annual) blessing of the animals. (Mark your calendars: November 1st.) So, you see, in Monterey the church and the library are friends.

Not so in Otis. Maybe you saw the story in the *Berkshire Record* a couple months ago. For over thirty years, the library in Otis has held an annual craft fair, which is a major fundraiser for them. It's always been on the same plot of lawn, which, as it turns out, the church owns. But that's never been a problem—not until this year, when the congregation, under the leadership of a new and even more extreme pastor, decided against allowing the library to use their lawn. Their stated reason was that the craft sale makes available for sale drug paraphernalia and satanic materials.

I don't know the librarians in Otis, or the makers whose crafts are for sale there. But if those people are anything like most of the librarians whom I *do* know, or the makers of crafts rough and fine whom I do know, I'd hazard the guess that no one would be more surprised to learn of an undercurrent of Satan and drug use at that craft sale than them.

Don't get me wrong. I have no doubt that Otis has as big a drug problem as every town in this county does, and as every county in this state does, and as every state in this country. Drug addiction and abuse is an enormous, and growing, problem no less here than anywhere else, and by some estimates more of one. Heroin, from what I understand, is cheaper to come by (and easier, if you're under the age of 21) than alcohol in Berkshire County. But I don't think the root of the region's drug problem can be fairly located at the Otis library craft sale.

As for satanic materials, I believe evil is real and is predatory, and insofar as Satan is understood as that which is accusatory, divisive, and adversarial, which is

what the Hebrew word *ha-Satan* means, I'm sad to conclude that this is also real. I just don't think that such a spirit is contained or even expressed in pentagrams or crystals and the like. Actually, in the case of the Otis church and library, I'd say the party engaged in an accusatory spirit the church (which I say knowing I risk engaging in a similar, accusatory spirit). But why should that surprise? After all, Satan is far too clever simply to show up and introduce him or herself as such: ""Hello. I'm Satan. Here's a five-pointed star for you to buy." A far better way would be this: "Hello. I'm righteous."

But none of this gets to what is the most deeply misguided notion at work in the congregation's decision—which is that they've capitulated to a secular world-view. They seem to believe that the overarching truth of the world is godlessness, fallenness; and what faith might be felt or what holiness might be real is so only as tiny islands amidst this secular stream, wide as it is and ever threatening to overwhelm. Their grand story is secularism, and the church is but a small, and embattled, particularity subsumed within a secular given. (Embattled is a must, for from this comes the resentment that is so energizing to such groups.)

This is a new notion in the history of Christianity, and I regret having to admit that it comes to us thanks to the protestant movement. Prior to all the schisms that have come of the last five centuries, the church was a to be an earthly manifestation of the overarching truth of God's reign—God at work in all things for good, which is not God as fully in everything (for that's pantheism) but God as interpenetrating everything (penentheism). The church was catholic, which is to say universal, because it witnessed to a God who is confessed and felt as Lord of all things, beyond which there is nothing, and out of bounds from whom no one or thing could possibly go. God is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, the all in all—even library crafts fairs where you can buy crystals and five-pointed stars.

This is the world as Jesus knew it and lived in it and as he preached in this pericope that is thick with the Greek word, *scandalizo*. It's a notion that the New Testament holds to—*skandalon* as the noun form, and *scandalizo*, the verb. No surprise that "Mark" makes no use at all of it as a noun—no surprise because Mark's gospel is a gospel on the go and Mark's Jesus is a savior who never rests, never sits

still, never needs more than a few verses of text to complete his tasks of healing and saving and setting to flight every spirit that is not the Holy Spirit. For Mark, and Mark's Jesus, it's all *scanadalizo*, all verb, eight times in his 20 chapters, and five times in these twelve verses.

It is translated here "stumbling block," but it's not always that. Elsewhere it is "fall away," "become deserters," and "take offense."

In Mark 4:17, it says that Jesus said of the seeds that fell on rocky soil, "...they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they *fall away*." *Scandalizo*.

In Mark 14:27-29, it says that "Jesus said to them, 'You will all *become deserters*...' [But] Peter said to him, 'Even though all *become deserters*, I will not.'" We know, though, that this isn't true. Even Peter would desert Jesus, desert through denial. Even Peter would *scandalizo*.

And in Mark 6:3, the people of Galilee asked, "'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they *took offense* at him." *Scandalizo*.

Here though, in the passage that we just heard, it's a stumbling block—a stumbling block that might scandalize someone young in the faith, the so-called "little ones," or a stumbling block that might scandalize oneself, each and any of us.

It's important to notice that this bit of preaching on Jesus' part comes of the disciples behaving as if competition were to be their mode as regards the gospel, competition rather than cooperation. Of course, when it comes the good news of God-with-us, we needn't assume it's a zero-sum game; instead, we need to cultivate within ourselves the faithful assurance that when it comes to the realm of God it is very much *not* the case that there are winners and there are losers and the winners take all. It's a tough assumption to shake; it's a tough certainty to let go. The disciples clearly had difficulty overcoming that, and it's important to note that the two events prior to this bit of Jesus preaching highlight the disciples failure to grasp this.

What we didn't hear is the disciples arguing among themselves as they made their way through Galilee to Capernaum. When they arrived at their destination,

Jesus asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” and they were silent because they’d argued about who among them was the greatest. (This follows the great event that only a few were invited to—up a mountain where Jesus was transfigured before them and where appeared with him Moses and Elijah. Perhaps this had them thinking why some were invited to that and others weren’t, why some had more intimate access to the most desired object of all—Jesus—while others weren’t. And so they wondered, “Who’s the greatest of all of us?”)

Jesus set them straight, though not in so straightforward a manner. He took a child (from where? who knows? perhaps some kid just wandering by) and held it close, saying, “Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all, and whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

But the disciples were still compelled to compete, though now that compulsion had them looking beyond themselves and their small circle. “Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” (Notice their concern wasn’t that this unknown healer wasn’t following *Jesus*, but that he wasn’t following “*us*,” which could mean Jesus and them, or could just mean them. Either way, it’s clear they wanted this unknown person to fall in line behind them, and the fact that he wouldn’t was their primary concern.)

Jesus, once again, set them straight. “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever isn’t against us is for us...”

Incidentally, this confidence is the same as what Moses felt when Joshua son of Nun tattled on the ones back in the camp who’d been temporarily authorized to prophesy in Moses’ absence. “Moses! Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!” Moses’ confident reply: “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!” It’s a confidence that seems to presuppose God as pervasive, the all in all. So, relax, guys. Relax, Joshua; relax, John! Don’t be so touchy. Don’t be so easily triggered.

Well, this is easy enough to say: “Relax. Calm down.” But it can be tough to do when it’s you who is triggered, when it’s you who are scandalized.

And this is where things get tricky, because there will be circumstances and phenomena that scandalize, that are a stumbling on the way of faith, that cause offense and a failing away from the truth.

Jesus’ preaching about stumbling blocks makes a quick, subtle shift. First he preaches as if addressing those who are mature in faith and who so run the risk of causing those who are newer to faith to stumble. They must—we must—be careful not to do that, for to cause any little ones to fall away or to desert or to take offense at the gospel is worse even than to drown. Then he shifts, though, to addressing the potentiality for us to cause *ourselves* to stumble. “...If your hand causes you to stumble...” “If your eye causes you to stumble...”

To be honest, I don’t think the first point is an urgent concern around here. Really, I’ve never experienced this congregation, or its congregants, as overly-confident, as patronizing or denigrating of others’ way of living what truth people find and swear by. We don’t race one another to see who can find Mark 9:38-50 fastest in the pew Bibles. We don’t snicker at people who find wisdom in places other than where we might find it. (*Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Hehe.)

Jesus’ second point though...

Supposing that people of faith can easily fall away given such scandals, different sects have decided upon different things as scandalous—and then have proscribed them, disallowed them. Dancing: I know among us are those who were made never to dance, because dancing can lead even the most faithful astray. I know among us are women who were raised as girls never to wear pants because only men are to wear pants and anything but skirts on a girl could scandalize. You must cover your head, you must not gamble, you must not drink alcohol of any sort ever: these were decided upon ways to avoid scandal among the faithful, to avoid stumbling blocks on the journey of the faithful along the way.

But we know better now, right? We know very well that none of these things are in and of themselves scandalous, none of these are intrinsically wrong. We know that Miriam danced on the other side of the Red Sea and that she’s remembered and

celebrated to have done so in the Bible. We know that the disciples (all men as named) were asked, when Jesus sent them out, to wear just sandals and but one tunic, saying nothing of a head covering or pants. We know that Jesus not only drank wine but *made* wine once when a wedding party had drunk up all they had, and, as for gambling, lots of people in the Bible are noted to have “cast lots” for any number of things. That’s gambling.

We’re wise to all this.

But our sophistication doesn’t rescue us from any and every stumbling block. What it does do is demand that we discern for ourselves what causes we ourselves—you yourself—to stumble, to fall away from God or to dwell in a state of taking offense; and then to cut those things out of your life.

There are people who cannot drink alcohol; to do so would be a sort of death. They must cut alcohol out of their lives, or they will never enter the kingdom of abundant life because that’s the effect alcohol has to such ones.

There are those for whom sex has been or would be exploitative or risky, painful or dehumanizing, and they must safeguard themselves from such behavior—not because sex is wrong but because sex for them is a particular risk.

When I was a younger woman, I had to avoid women’s fashion magazines because I found exposing myself to certain standards and norms akin to committing violence against myself. I didn’t do this (as some supposed) because I was “religious.” I did this because that matrix of values and aesthetics had me feeling far from God.

Now, I avoid certain social situations because they feel alienating or oppressive. I don’t listen to Rush Limbaugh even when the Huffington Post tells me I should. I don’t read the comments sections anywhere on-line except occasionally in response to a story in the *New York Times*. I’ve been to a casino once, a riverboat casino in Natchez, Mississippi, a setting I felt as so exploitative and deceitful I promised myself I’d never go to another casino again.

See, it’s tricky. It’s really tricky to know what might scandalize and cause a falling away. It’s tricky enough to know what might trigger such a thing in ourselves, so it’s all the trickier to know what might do so to a “little one.”

What's more, certain segments of our society have gone far—I'd say too far—with the notion that to be triggered is a thing to be avoided at all costs. Many college and university students are presenting to faculty and administration an expectation that they will never be upset, never encounter an idea or phenomenon that could disturb or agitate. An article in this month's *Atlantic Magazine* explores just how deeply this expectation has already changed campus and classroom culture—which is itself disturbing because lots of people (including me) would say that one main point of higher education is to be disturb young adults out of adolescent ignorance or certainties, to be agitated so to make often needed social changes.

How would an English class go that was intent on not triggering anyone? No *Heart of Darkness*. No *Macbeth*. No slave narratives or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

What about a history class designed not to cause distress? No American Civil War. No modern European history. Certainly no current events and what context makes them intelligible.

Really, we have a responsibility to grow up, to mature past the point of being “little ones.” At some point, we must not be so easily triggered. What helps in that regard is trusting that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof—casinos and college classrooms and library craft sales all included.

We also have a responsibility in aiding those little ones on their journey from youth to adulthood, from novice to experienced. Strong as we are in the faith (by my estimation, at least), we must take care to recognize where people are still growing and to go easy in those places, to be gentle, to be kind.

Finally, we have a responsibility as regards ourselves to watch over our lives of faith and hope that faith and hope might grow, that nihilism and cynicism might meet their match in what deep root and bright flower our faith and hope do put forth.

When to challenge, when to go easy; when to stand ground, when to give way: the journey of faith is one of discernment. Our best hope is that the Holy Spirit is our guide.

Thanks be to God.