

September 26, 2021, Proper 21, Year B

Stumbling Towards Welcome

In today's gospel, we are reminded, yet again, that Jesus' disciples just never got *anything* the first time around. Often not the second, often not the third. This passage today is situated between the second and third times that Jesus told them what was going to happen, predicted his coming passion, told them what it meant to follow him, and... they didn't get it. They are following him... I mean, they are literally following him all around the countryside, and yet when he explains what it means to follow him... they don't get it. The first time he says: ““If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,[a] will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” The second time, he says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And they still don't get it. And we arrive at this story not long before he is going to tell them: “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

So when John came to Jesus here and says that they tried to stop someone who was spreading the good news, but not of their little band of in group folks, I imagine that it was one of many times that our Lord just sorta shook his head and sighed, and thought, yup, I gotta tell you this again, don't I? Jesus' warm, radical welcome didn't require knowing him personally or following him physically—for which those of us born 2000 years later can be truly thankful. Jesus wanted to welcome all into the embrace of God's love. And if that meant people two counties over casting out demons in his name, great! Demons are cast out! Job well done! And “no one who does a deed of power in his name will soon after be able to speak evil of him.”

I was having a conversation about a story from 2 Kings recently, where Elijah the Tishbite replies to some impertinent inquiries: “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you,” and it does. And my friend found this troubling, because such stories have been used to justify killing people who do not believe what we believe, all over history. But here's the thing about that justification—If I were to say: “If I am of God let fire consume you,” and with no further action on my part, fire from out of nowhere consumes you? I'm gonna think that this God definitely means business, and nope, I'm not going to soon speak evil of him! I imagine that's part of what's going on here. Even if this itinerant demon caster is in fact a huckster, an habitual seller of snake oil, and he hears there's this Jesus fellow

in town and he's an excellent caster out of demons, and thinks to himself: "What can it hurt? I'm literally not doing anything, just yelling to people that they are healed now." And then he tries it in the name of Jesus and for the first time they ARE healed? I think that is a huckster who will in that moment have experienced real conversion of life!

Aside from the story of that one fellow and his journey with the power of Jesus (and wow is this itinerant demon-caster one whose story I would love to hear more of!) We have some pretty strong words from Jesus about not preventing people from belief. "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." That's... definitive. If you put a stumbling block before anyone, it would be better for you that you were dead. Strong language. Hyperbole, even, but we see Jesus use hyperbole when things are really, really important, and this is—If any of you cause someone to stumble, it would be better that you were dead instead. The word "cause to stumble" is the same word from which we get "scandal" or "scandalize." We might say, if any of you make someone trying to follow me into a scandal, it would be better that you were dead.

When, as followers of Jesus, we are wrestling over how to “attract” more churchgoers or any of the other terms that goes by, I like to remember how Jesus looked at it: He didn’t really give the disciples rules about how to “get more people in pews,” but rather gave them a dire warning about not *preventing* people from coming. And the warning is vague! What causes someone to stumble? Jesus seems clear that that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter why or how we cause someone to stumble on their way to Jesus—it matters that we don’t do it. John the Baptist called to make straight the path for Jesus, but Jesus calls us to make straight the path to him. To extend radical, embarrassing, lavish welcome. To welcome those who are not in the in crowd. To welcome those *especially*. To welcome the stranger, the tax collector, the sinner. To welcome those *especially*. We will ourselves stumble, as the disciples did. And we will wonder, what about that guy, two counties over... do I welcome him too? He’s not really... one of us. And Jesus says yes. Welcome that one too. Welcome that one *especially*.

[Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22](#)

[Psalm 124](#)

[James 5:13-20](#)

[Mark 9:38-50](#)

