

TEXT: Mark 9:38-50

Move the ottoman!

Today we begin with a little “Name that tune” moment. Close your eyes if it helps you to listen. I’ll even give you the category – it’s a theme song. Ready? (do theme song). Do you recognize it? Yes- from the Dick Van Dyke show (1961-1966). And do you remember what happened while that music was playing? Especially when the music went _____? Yes. After walking through his front door, Dick Van Dyke would stumble over an ottoman in the living room, making quite an entrance. Occasionally, he’d take an exaggerated step detouring himself around it -- but a majority of the time, _____, that ottoman would trip him up, and down he’d go. Now I realize that was a schtick, and appreciate Mr. Van Dyke’s ability to jump right back up. But still it does raise a question of Rob and Laura Petrie – did it ever occur to anyone to move that ottoman? To get something that was clearly in the way out of the way? To keep from tripping someone up or causing them harm?

Back in Jesus’ day, that ottoman would have been called a skandalon. What English word do you hear in that word? Scandal – that’s where we get it. Skandalon referred to a stone a person stumbled on and then cursed, which then caused the person to be scandalized. A skandalon was a stumbling block, a barrier that was in the way, or that caused one to trip and fall – physically, and then in later use, spiritually. Today’s text from Mark deals with people setting up and tripping over stumbling blocks – and Jesus taking it very seriously. To him, it is nothing short of scandalous.

The first stumbling block scandal is set up by the disciple John. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” John’s implied question was “We done good, right Jesus?” We’re the ones you called and sent out to do that in your name – we’re the licensed and legit disciples, right Jesus? So that’s why we put up a barrier to stop him, because he wasn’t doing it right and was part of us. And Jesus’ implied questions might have been “What were you thinking? Are you ever going to listen and learn from me?” Jesus’ response was no doubt a surprise, causing John and others to trip over their own expectations. “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” If some other person, some other group is doing faithful work with Christ-like intention – even they aren’t part of your group, or don’t do it your way, don’t follow your rules – let it be. Don’t stop them, don’t judge them. Don’t set it up or see it as a scandal, a stumbling block – because if you do, the only one tripping and falling is you. Them is us. So stop yourself when tempted to put some barrier up against those from other denominations, or no denomination, or of other faith traditions, languages and worship styles in general– or of one very particular faith community called RiverCross Fellowship. Don’t do it, says Jesus. Don’t put your energy into negating others. Move that ottoman – because the only one who will trip over that is you. And the reason that is so important is Jesus’ next point.

“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. “ In other words, our stumbling over such things becomes a stumbling block, a scandalous thing, for others. Someone at our Wednesday morning Bible Study immediately

and wisely saw the connection to the last part of your Vision Statement. Why would this be a stumbling block for others? Because we are “reflecting Christ to the world”. And if what “little ones” – term used for new believers, or those wondering about the Christian faith – if what they see in us is judgement or jealousy, bitterness or blame, divisiveness or dismissiveness, who would want to be a part of that? And even if we aren’t doing this personally, we need to acknowledge that there is a lot of stumbling block setting up going on out there – a lot of them/us, a lot of vitriol, a lot of tearing down rather than building up – and we need to overcompensate to move those ottomans out of peoples’ way. Jesus takes our witness to those seeing faith by looking at us very seriously --- like millstone around the neck and tossed into the sea seriously – and so should we.

And lastly come the stumbling block warnings we are to take most personally. And they do get our attention – what with the self-mutilation and threat of hell’s unquenchable fire. First an important word about reading these words in the spirit of and understanding the style in which they were spoken. This was an intense and extreme style of speech common in the Aramaic spoken in Jesus’ day. He was not wanting his disciples, then or now, to lob off limbs or pluck out eyes. And actually, he was not speaking about hell in an eternal judgement afterlife kind of way. In fact, Mark doesn’t speak of that kind of hell – no one did until many centuries after Jesus. The word he uses is Gehenna – which refers to an actual, physical location outside of Jerusalem, a place familiar to his hearers. It was a place known for idol worship and even child sacrifice in OT times, and in Jesus’ day, was the garbage dump for all of Jerusalem – one that was constantly burning – unquenchable fire. No one wanted to go there physically --- or be associated with it spiritually.

Jesus is saying to disciples then, and now --- watch yourself. Watch that you don't put a stumbling block in front of yourself, and fall from faithfulness. As the American writer Ralph Marston said "There are plenty of difficult obstacles in your path, Don't allow yourself to become one of them."

Check your hands, says Jesus. How might they be causing you to stumble in your faith? Are your fists closed in anger? Are you reluctant to offer an open hand and to give generously? When action is called for, are you sitting on your hands and doing nothing? Are you using your hands to point fingers at others? When someone extends a hand in a gesture of reconciliation, do you meet them with yours, or put it in your pocket? Are there things you are holding on to too tightly – the past, a grudge, your church as you knew it? If any of that is true of your hands, your life, change it – move the ottoman – the stumbling block to your own faithfulness.

Check your feet, says Jesus. How might they be causing you to stumble in your faith? Are they taking you to places where you shouldn't be going? When it is time to take a stand on something – or stand up for someone in need of support – do your feet rise to the occasion, or are they propped up somewhere? Do you use your feet to step on others' toes or trample on their feelings? Or to run away from the work it takes to make difficult decisions? If any of that is true of your feet, your life, change it – move that ottoman – the stumbling block to your own faithfulness.

Check your eyes, says Jesus. How might they be causing your to stumble in your faith? How do you see yourself – as greater than you ought, as always right, with no need for improvement or humility? Or do you see yourself as too small, discounting, dismissing the gifts of God in you that God calls you to use? How do you see others? Do you see with eyes of

jealousy, coveting what others have? Do you see with eyes of prejudice, judging who others are? Or do you close your eyes to the needs of others, or to the reality in our midst now? If any of that is true of your eyes, your life, change it – move that ottoman – the stumbling block to your own faithfulness.

Our kids were always quick to say, when someone was blocking their view –usually of the TV – “You make a better door than a window”. Sometimes they just shouted out “Door!” Hearing Jesus’ words, and with the Holy Spirit’s guidance and help – may we be less door, blocking others’ view of the gospel – and more window showing them the way. May we be less stumbling block to others, and to ourselves – and more stepping stone that leads the way to greater faithfulness. From our hands, our feet, our eyes – our minds, our mouths, our hearts – let us rid ourselves of anything that might trip us, or others up. It may be too late for Dick Van Dyke, but it is not too late for us, or for this world God’s so loves – so let’s move the ottoman!