

Acts 2:42-47 ~ Matthew 18:1-14
Essential and Infinite Value
 4th Sunday of Easter ~ May 3, 2020 ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion
 Communion Meditation
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction:

“I love to tell the story; ‘twill be my theme in glory to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.”ⁱ Thanks to Greg Reieron for singing this wonderful song so beautifully. And yes, this is the story we love to hear and to tell. And this is the story that brings us here today. The story that brings us to the Table, the Lord’s Table. The story nourishes our spirits and sustains our souls, especially in times of trouble and trial. And sometimes the story has to give us a little kick to get us back on track. That’s the kind you are about to hear.

This one is about Jesus and a “tough love” talk he gives his disciples. If you ever wondered what winds Jesus up: Today’s story is one answer. Jesus had just given Peter the keys of the kingdom (16:19), but then they pop off with a question that clearly displayed how *not* ready they were to get behind the wheel. You want to make Jesus mad? Just ask him, “Who’s the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Perhaps he had hoped they knew better by that point.

I will warn you: What comes next is hard to hear. It may be one of your least favorite passages in the Bible. It’s intense: He talks about self-mutilation and fiery eternal punishment. Yet at the same time, it’s invitational. “Come, see this child, this “little one” as I do.” And, it’s embracing, especially when any of us are feeling lost or left out. It’s all part of Jesus’ story and his love.

Meditation:

Who is essential? Since the beginning of social distancing, perhaps the concept of “essential worker” is snapping into focus in a new way. Although we may each have our own idea of who and what is essential for our daily living, this pandemic has shined a light on one clear fact about essential workers: The importance of their work is not necessarily reflected in what they are paid or in the conditions under which they are required to work. Perhaps, we can hope, one positive outcome of this pandemic will be better pay and more respect for those essential workers on the minimum wage end of the divide.

What is essential to being a church? No longer able to gather in our sanctuary safely for worship on Sunday mornings, pushes this question front and center for us. And that’s not all bad. We are learning what we really value and truly miss. Our first lesson is the beautiful story of the church’s first days after Pentecost: clearly, they responded to Christ’s life, death and resurrection with a new approach to living, where the good of all came first. Here, now 2,000 years later, and six weeks since we had “normal” church --we can see more clearly ways that we may be missing the mark and diverting from the core of our mission as the Body of Christ.

In today's lesson, Jesus called those things "stumbling blocks." He uses that word "stumbling" six times in four verses, so I think we need to pay attention to it. The word "stumbling blocks" in Greek is "skandolan" and it means an impediment that causes one to fall, a snare, something that causes us to fall away from Christ, anything that leads us to sin, to break covenant. What I find interesting and important here is the sin, the "skandolan" that got Jesus on his high horse wasn't the kind of scandal that would ever make headlines in the National Enquirer, the New York Times, or Fox News. The sin, the skandolan, the "stumbling block" that got Jesus so wound up was their drive for status and power. This is the drive that derails and destroys the body of Christ who came to save the least, the last and the lost. The drive for status and power blinds and maims the church in her mission to spread the news that everyone is essential and infinitely valuable in the eyes of God. The drive for status and power at the expense of others of "the little ones" was the very opposite of Jesus and his love.

"Little Ones" or "Children," in Jesus' time were not adored and valued as they are today. Back then, children were considered inferior, they had no status or rights, children were considered more like property than people. For Jesus to lift up a child as an example of what they must become, to even enter the kingdom, would have been shocking. What was his point? I think the child on the edge of the crowd was the nearest and best example at hand of a "Little one" who also stood for anyone who was seen as "less than" or "other." His call to change and be like children was a call for adults to *choose* the humility and dependence, inherent, inborn in a young child. This is what Jesus wants us to do. To choose self-emptying in order to be filled by the Holy Spirit. This is the essence of being church: Paul spelled it out clearly in Philippians 2.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others [little ones] as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others [little ones]. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8)

Stumbling blocks abound, as Jesus warned his disciples. This we know all too well. Small stumbling blocks, left in place can stack up and lead to life-crushing, world-altering consequences. If you've been in Germany, perhaps you have seen them. When my husband Bob was teaching a semester in Wittenberg/Lutherstadt in 2013, I will never forget the first time I saw a "stumbling stone" and learned what it was. See this stone made the sin, the *skandolan* of the holocaust more vivid and personal than it had before.

These "stumbling stones" in German, "stolperstein" are small brass stones embedded directly underfoot among the cobblestones on the street. Each stumbling stone commemorates a victim of the holocaust right outside their last-known freely chosen residence. It says, "Here lived, the victim's name, date of birth, and fate." There are now over 70,000 of them honoring all victims of the Nazi regime, including Jewish, Roma, disabled, dissident, Afro-German, and "asocial" citizens. The 70,000th stolperstein was laid for Willy Zimmerer, a German man with learning disabilities murdered at Hadamar psychiatric hospital outside of Frankfurt.ⁱⁱ These

stones were put there to help us all to remember these victims and to never forget the destructive potential in the drive for power and status at the expense of the common good.

So, where's the good news? Jesus also clearly tells us in this passage what makes him rejoice. It's there at the beginning, where he talks about welcoming "once such child" and it's there at the end in the parable of the Lost Sheep: Rescue the suffering, reach out to all who are hanging on by a thread; look for the sheep who is lost. Every soul counts. That's where today's Bible story ends. And where our work begins.

Our Presbyterian denomination, at its most recent (2018) General Assembly put it this way: "We say Yes to affirming and celebrating the full spectra of human identity and No to discrimination and bigotry."ⁱⁱⁱ As a Matthew 25 church, essential to us, is eradicating systemic poverty. This begins (but does not end) with feeding those who are hungry. With dollars and volunteers, we are supporting the increased demand that SOS is seeing weekly, as cars drive up to receive a week's worth of groceries. The Holy Spirit has also led us to collaborate with Tony Gonzalez in a new project, "Canasta Basica Gratuita" which provides a "free basic basket" of food for our Hispanic neighbors not otherwise served by the help our government is providing. We are organizing a food drop event on May 16. I believe these are moves that make Jesus rejoice.

Jesus is waiting for us to sing the new, new song of a world where every sheep is counted, counted on, and never, never discounted. Jesus is looking at us in the eyes of every "little one" who is hungry, homeless, or harmed by systems that they were born into the wrong side of. Bring them in. Bring them up. One cup of cold water at a time. When we do this, we are remembering Jesus' values, and in that moment, in that place, God's kin-dom becomes a reality. Right in the midst of this world where stumbling blocks can stack up into insurmountable walls. Let us come to the Table: where everyone born is essential.

ⁱⁱⁱ "I Love to Tell the Story," Text: Katherine Hankey, music William G. Fischer, #462, Glory to God Hymnal.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/feb/18/stumbling-stones-a-different-vision-of-holocaust-remembrance>

ⁱⁱⁱ From "For Such A Time as This, A Proclamation of Kindom Values," affirmed by the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).