



The Opportunities of Obstacles



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

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Grace Episcopal Church
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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-09-27-AWW.mp3>.

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Mark 9:38-50

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Jesus and the disciples were in Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum was the home base for Jesus' ministry in that region, and so it would have been pretty common to see him and the disciples wandering about town.

One day, while Jesus was otherwise occupied, John and a few of the others were out on the street, running a few errands, maybe, going to the marketplace to buy food, when they saw this guy, someone who was not part of their circle, doing what they do – healing people in the name of Jesus. Outraged, John and the others confront the man, telling him to stop: Hey, you! What are you doing? We see you there. Cut that out!

Returning to where they were staying, the disciples immediately reported the incident to Jesus, fully expecting a pat on the back and a few words of encouragement and congratulations for handling the situation so well, but instead, Jesus turned the whole conversation around: What were you thinking, Jesus said, that guy was acting in my name, doing what my followers should be doing – caring for someone in need. Why did you stop him? “Whoever is not against us, is for us.”

While the disciples were pointing fingers at the unknown healer, eager to cast judgment for his behavior and actions, Jesus pointed fingers at the disciples, warning them to stop worrying about what other people were doing. The man on the street was not a problem, at least not for Jesus. He was not hurting anyone. He was not doing anything bad. He was helping someone, loving his neighbor as himself. You don't stop someone for doing that.

For Jesus, it was disciples who were the problem. They were being selfish and spiteful, acting as if they had exclusive rights to doing Jesus' work, and that was causing the disciples to do more harm than good, so Jesus wanted them to get their act together, to stop paying attention to what others were doing and pay attention to what they were doing, to focus on themselves, because they were becoming a stumbling block to his work and ministry. They were getting in the way. The disciples were becoming an obstacle to the Gospel.

My heart goes out to that man on the street, whoever he was. He only wanted to follow Jesus, and then he encountered the disciples, encountered a barrier to living out his faith. Tell me, when it comes to your faith life, what are your stumbling blocks? What keeps getting in your way? What are the obstacles preventing you from knowing God more closely?

Every spiritual journey encounters impediments and hurdles, even obstructions. Many of these we put up ourselves. Like the disciples, we spend too much time worrying about other people

and not enough time focused on ourselves, doing the important work of looking inward, understanding who we are and how we interact with the world around us. Or, we are inconsistent with our spiritual practices, not regularly committing to time with God, letting ourselves off the hook by telling ourselves who don't have enough time – there is just too much going on. Or, we get in our own way by requiring faith to make perfect sense. Everything about God and Jesus and the Bible has to fall neatly into place, like the solution to a mathematics problem, or we cannot believe. It all breaks down for us.

Other stumbling blocks are placed in our path, by people and institutions; sometimes, even by the Church. Some of us here this morning have had experiences of Church that, later, became barriers. There are churches that moralize ethical behavior rather than preach the Good News; churches so strict in their system of beliefs there is no room for questions or interpretation; churches which seem to forget that God's grace is greater than any sin.

If you have been part of a church like that, you know how painful it is, to discover there is no room left for you at the inn, and therefore, you are out, out in the cold, ostracized by churches that seem to flip around the words of Jesus to say if you are not for us then you are against us.

Impediments and hurdles, by their very nature, hamper our relationship with God. When we encounter them, God might feel distant or absent, unresponsive to our efforts to connect, and the bigger the impediment, the more we struggle. Obstructions might cause us to abandon our faith altogether. We give up, stop going to church, because it is just not worth it. We are not getting anything out of it.

Stumbling block and obstacles, though, are also opportunities: opportunities to grow, to find new meaning, to perceive life differently and expand our understanding of God. Whatever is holding us back is also an opportunity for us to move forward. If we can get through whatever is impeding our spiritual journey, those barriers can become part of the foundation for a deeper connection with the divine and a better, more fulfilling life.

It reminds me of something the great Hall of Fame baseball player, Yogi Berra, once said. He was being interviewed by a reporter who was asking about Berra's recent lack of success at the plate. Berra was just not connecting with the ball, and the reporter wanted to know: "Was he in a slump?"

"Slump?" Berra replied, "I ain't in no slump. I just ain't hittin' the ball."

Berra, in his own, unique way, reframed the question. He looked at his lack of hitting differently than the reporter did. His lack of hitting wasn't an obstacle. It was an opportunity, an opportunity to hit the ball better.

Jesus wants us to do the same thing and look at our stumbling blocks in a different light. In the Gospel story, we hear him talk about our hands and feet and eyes, parts of ourselves that we value and hold dear. Things we believe we need to live a happy and fulfilling life. We probably cannot imagine anything worse than losing a hand, or a foot, or an eye; but, Jesus says there is; and, it is a life without God. That is why, in very graphic, over-the-top language, Jesus says if your hand

or your foot or your eye is a stumbling bloc, get rid of it, cut it off, rip it out, because you will be better off without it.

So, tell me, when it comes to a life of faith, what are your stumbling blocks? What keeps getting in your way? What are the obstacles preventing you from knowing God more closely?

Like the disciples, it may be the tendency toward finger-pointing and being judgmental. Or, perhaps, like the unknown man in the crowd who was confronted by the disciples, at some time in your life, you may have experienced intolerance and prejudice. Whatever it is, we know such basic human behaviors can lead us away from the kingdom of God. They can prevent us from living the kind of life we want to live, the kind of life God hopes we will live, and so Jesus invites us to move past those things which impede us from growing closer to God, by seeing the obstacles as opportunities: the opportunity to follow Jesus; the opportunity to love the Lord; the opportunity to be the kind of person we really want to be.

As Pope Francis said in his address to Congress:

We must resolve now to live as nobly and as justly as possible... Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities. The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us.

Yes, indeed. And, Amen.