

Series: Words & Deeds Part 2: “Really! They Are Life Changing”
“Being A Stumbling Block And Stepping Stone”
Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-11
Matthew 16:21-28

The way you live your life in the difficult times indicates being a follower of Jesus who “gets it.” A member in a previous congregation I served said to me over breakfast, “I’m tired of picking myself up from the floor. I feel like I’m continually being knocked down.” Many ask the question, “Isn’t being a Christian supposed to minimize life’s bumps and bruises?”

The Bible indicates something different. Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Job lost his family and possessions. The blind man endured the crowds until Jesus could heal him. Stephen was stoned to death for telling the truth. In each of the cases cited, the stepping stone was received despite the difficulty. The Bible teaches that perseverance matters.

Perseverance is God’s gift for us to accept with confidence that “what is” does not have the last word. And so the rhythm of stumbling block to stepping stone and stepping stone to stumbling

block is normal for growth as a Christian.

God has a divine plan for all creation. That plan includes stumbling blocks and stepping stones. Listen carefully. A stepping stone becomes a stumbling block when we focus on the negative and do not realize that the stepping stone becomes a stumbling block. Let me share a recent personal experience of a stepping stone becoming a stumbling block.

On Friday, July 7th, I parked my car at City Hall in Laguna Woods to get the permit for a new Hotwater Heater. As I began to walk toward the ramp up to City Hall, I was in a hurry. I needed to get back to the church sooner than later. Given my pace, I kept my sight on the ramp and then found myself flying horizontally toward the ramp. I broke my fall with my left side. Fortunately, I did not hit my head. I was in shock lying motionless. Two individuals came to my side, waited six minutes or so and helped me up. I was sore, but got back on the mission to get my permit. The stepping stone of the ramp became a stumbling block of a 10.5” high curb which I didn’t see and tripped on it. The consequences were quite negative. But I needed to embrace the stumbling block and my stupidity to turn the stumbling block into a stepping stone.

Jeremiah 15:15-21, Psalm 26:1-8, Romans 12:9-11, and Matthew 16:21-28 all indicate that not staying focused on the stepping stone because it might seem more difficult will turn that stepping stone into a stumbling block. There are consequences. But a decision can turn the stumbling block back into a stepping stone.

Jeremiah 15:15-21, Stumbling Block to Stepping Stone

Jeremiah 15:17-18, Stumbling Block: “I did not sit in the company of merry-makers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had me filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you

are a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” Jeremiah feels the weight of God’s hand on him even when he has not sat with merry-makers or rejoice. Yet the weight of God’s hand on him has filled Jeremiah with indignation. His pain is increasing and the wound incurable, refusing to heal. And then the admission. God, you are like a deceitful brook to me with waters that fail.

Jeremiah 15:19-19-20, Stepping Stone: “Therefore says the LORD: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.” Jeremiah admitted how he didn’t like the stumbling block that was placed before him. And he blamed God. And then things turned around. God promised to deliver him from the worthless and take Jeremiah back to be God’s mouth.

Psalm 26:1-8, Stumbling Block to Stepping Stone

Psalm 26:4-5, Stumbling Block: “I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.” The psalmist sees the stumbling block of making the worthless, hypocrites, evildoers, and wicked his group to “hang with.” Instead, the Psalmist grasps the negative of doing such and cries out to God to turn the stumbling block into a stepping stone.

Psalm 26:1-3, Stepping Stone: “Vindicate me O LORD, for I walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.” The stumbling block reappears on a regular basis. But because the Psalmist has the steadfast love of

God before his eyes, he will chose more often than not to walk in integrity.

Romans 12:9-21, Stumbling Block to Stepping Stone

Romans 12:14, 19, Stumbling Block: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance, I will repay, says the Lord.’” Paul gets it. He is reminding Christians then and now that the stumbling block is the temptation to take matters into their own hands. When bad stuff is happening to followers of Jesus, it is not their call. Payback belongs to God.

Romans 12:20-21, Stepping Stone: “...if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” What a shift in paradigm for followers of Jesus. Yes, to dispense love not revenge. That turns the stumbling block back into a stepping stone.

Matthew 16:21-28, Stumbling Block to Stepping Stone

Matthew 16:21-23, Stumbling Block: “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’” Often, Christians take on Jesus because we think we know better. Jesus told Peter he had become a stumbling block. Jesus has said that to Christians many times.

Matthew 16:24-26, Stepping Stone: “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those

who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” Seizing recognition in an attempt to make one’s life matter is a dead end. Instead, self-denial, self-sacrifice, and loving others turns the stumbling block into a stepping stone.¹

That Friday morning, July 7th, became a profound life lesson for me. The stepping stone of the ramp became a stumbling block of a 10.5” high curb which I didn’t see and tripped. The consequences were quite negative. But I needed to embrace the stumbling block and my stupidity to turn the stumbling block into a stepping stone. I had to slow down to stay focused on the stepping stones in my life journey. Stumbling blocks are a part of life, but never the end itself. They are a means to once again to walk on stepping stones.

God’s divine plan is this: Admit you don’t like being a stumbling block. Experience God turning things around to be a stepping stone. Recognize that stumbling blocks reappear on a regular basis. Remember, the steadfast love of God is before your eyes. Choose to walk in integrity. Love your enemies. Realize that taking on Jesus because you know better makes you a stumbling block. Self-denial and not thinking you know better than Jesus turns you into being a stepping stone. Live the rhythm of stumbling block to stepping stone and stepping stone to stumbling. Embrace the tension and grow through it. That is Christian discipleship. Amen!

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 03 September 2023
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

¹In the eight paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of John W. Wright, Lincoln E. Galloway, Ron Rienstra, Sally A. Brown, Karen Baker-Fletcher, David J. Schlafer, and Raquel St. Clair Lettsome in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 262-265, 265-267, 268-271, 272-274, 274-275, 276-278, and 278-280.

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