

Stumbling Blocks

Rev. Joe Connolly

“Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judah and Simon? Are not the sisters of Jesus here with us?” They found these things to be stumbling blocks.” — Mark 6:3.

Occasionally people will ask me about the heritage of the United Church of Christ, ask from where does our denomination come? Yes we are a merger of four denominations— Evangelical, Reform, Christian and Congregational— in 1957.

But a large hunk of that is Congregational. And all the others decided to fit in with a Congregational way of doing things. While how we govern ourselves is no longer totally Congregational— it could be argued that it’s somewhat Presbyterian— it certainly is a more Congregational way of doing things than the other groups had ever experienced before. Therefore, given that Congregational heritage, I sometimes use a short, quick, dirty way of describing us which points to that aspect of our heritage.

However, I need to offer a word of explanation about the description I want to give. We all celebrate Thanksgiving, right? The picture which gets painted about the origins of that holiday says the colonists, the Pilgrims, magnanimously shared a harvest meal with the natives in what we now call Massachusetts, in the vicinity of what has come to be known as Plymouth Rock, the place where legend has it the Pilgrims landed.

In fact, pretty nearly all of what I just said is legend. The Pilgrims were actually indebted to the natives who had helped these immigrants survive. No one really knows where they landed but there is a rock with a plaque on it commemorating the event. The fact that thanks was given and the harvest shared is, however, not in question.

That having been said, this is also not debatable. The Pilgrims were the first Congregationalists on these shores. Hence, the short, quick, dirty way I use of explaining who we are is to say, “If you think Pilgrims— you’ve got us.”

Yes, a full explanation is much, much more complex than that. But short, quick, dirty is usually enough. “If you think Pilgrims— you’ve got us.”

Let me paint some more history, at least in a broad, short, quick, dirty way. When these first Congregationalist arrived there was no such thing as ordained clergy among them.

A spiritual leader was elected from within the ranks of a Congregation. Those chosen were often the best read, most highly educated among the group. And yes, back then they were only men chosen. We *have* come a long way.

That brings me to the topic of how have we Congregationalist chose our theological leadership. Simply choosing someone from the ranks went by the wayside after colleges were established on these shores.

Harvard, an institution founded by Congregationalists, opened its doors in 1636. Indeed, that Congregationalists established Harvard says something about who we are.

With colleges it became evident who might be the best read, most highly educated— someone who had attended college. By the early to mid 1700s it was thought more training for pastoral leadership was desirable. And so, after attaining a degree a candidate for ministry would intern for several years with a settled pastor before moving on to their own ministry.

By the early to mid 1800s it was thought even more training was desirable. A second Bachelor's Degree—today we call it a Master's Degree— a second Bachelor's Degree became a standard.

Now I have always maintained— this is also short, quick and dirty— I have always maintained there's a difference between certification and qualification. I say if you did not arrive at Seminary already qualified to be a pastor no certification, no advanced degree will make you qualified. Degrees certify. They make no pretense about qualifying. (Slight pause.)

These words are from the work known as Mark. “‘Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judah and Simon? Are not the sisters of Jesus here with us?’ They found these things to be stumbling blocks.” (Slight pause.)

So, how do we Congregationalists choose pastoral leadership these days? For a very long time, meaning back into the 1700s, Associations have trusted a committee— often called a Committee on Authorized Ministry— to determine if a candidate is both qualified and certified.

However humans being human, often the process degenerated into asking who is certified, who has the credentials, has checked the right boxes, jumped through the hoops of the certification process? If that's the area where the attention gets focused— who is certified rather than who is qualified— then who is actually qualified tends to get lost.

Of course, *answering* the question who is certified brings some protection for those asking about certification and qualification. It's easy to defend a choice by saying this person *is* certified, has the credentials, has checked the right boxes, has jumped through the hoops of the process.

Asking who is qualified is a much more taxing question. You see, qualification is in many ways a matter of making a judgment about interpersonal relationships, a matter of discernment.

We all know relationships among people are fluid. But making judgments about interpersonal relationships, not box checking, is what Committees on Authorized Ministry are asked to do today.

And so perhaps one of many things which might be judged as a qualification for pastoral leadership is, for instance, displaying sense of equanimity, a calmness, a composure, an evenness of temper, especially in difficult situations. Put differently, what is really essential in the process of qualification is not a readily visible trait.

And perhaps that is why the first Congregationalists on these shores elected a spiritual leader from within their ranks. Who had qualifying but invisible attributes was evident because of relationships already established.

In theory at least, this method is still in use today. If someone in *this* Congregation is seen as having potential for spiritual leadership then we, the Congregation, need to raise that person up, support them financially, emotionally, physically and send them off for the certification demanded in our times. (Slight pause.)

That brings me back to what happened in this story from today's Gospel. I think the story hits several valid points. Perhaps the most important is the very humanness of it. The story tells us there is a human need for mutual support. We need to believe in one another, trust one another, hope for and hope in one another, support one another.

Do not misunderstand me. Certification, credentials, checking the right boxes, jumping through the hoops can be very, very important.

But when we make certification an exclusive criteria we are not just missing the point. When we make certification an exclusive criteria we, the church, are abdicating our responsibility to our self be engaged with one another.

Let me point out what I did *not* just say. I *did not* suggest by failing to be engaged in interpersonal relationship we are failing one another. I suggested by failing to be engaged in interpersonal relationship we are abdicating a responsibility *to our own self*, each individual self. (Slight pause.)

So now let me now turn toward responsibility to one another. There is a basic, chronic, even human way we fail at interpersonal relationships. It's called tribalism.

And that thought brings me once again to today's Gospel reading. Again, it is the humanness of the story which impresses me. Is this about "why can't they see Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ?" No, it's not about why they can't see Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. Substitute another name of Jesus and could see the same situation happen in relationships today.

And so let me ask where do *we* put stumbling blocks in our own way? Perhaps it's counterintuitive but I want to suggest certification is not a stumbling block. Certification can be readily managed, checked, applied, understood.

But discernment, discerning interpersonal relationships, that's hard. And discernment is a responsibility which demands something of us. Discernment can be a stumbling block, especially when we take pains to avoid it.

And I, therefore, also think in the end this is about faith. The particular story in question is about faith in Jesus. However, there is a more expansive idea here.

We need to be participants in faith. And yes, we need to have faith in God, in Jesus, in the Spirit. But we also need to participate discernment which is not easy. For me, that must by definition translate as having faith in others.

Will people fail us at times? Will faith seem unwarranted? Why, yes it will. Does that mean we should stop striving discern, stop having faith in one another? No, it does not.

You see, at the end of the reading what does Jesus do or rather how does Jesus act? Jesus has faith in others, in the twelve, sends them out in pairs. And what do they do? They proclaim the message of God, empowered by Jesus who has faith in them. (Slight pause.)

Here's my bet. Jesus has faith in us to proclaim a message of God, especially the message of God's love. So, are we willing to trust Jesus, trust that message, trust ourselves, trust each other? Or will we set up stumbling blocks instead. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "Discernment is hard. I want to suggest discernment, especially discerning the will of God is very hard. It requires faith. And this was our thought for meditation today from Winifred Gallagher: 'Faith requires something more than comfortable self knowledge. It requires difficult things— doubt, repentance, observance— these are perplexing in our world of going with the flow and

doing your own thing, a world of comfortable personal space.’ As if to prove that point, I stumbled across a quote from Saint Augustine this week. (Quote:) ‘If you comprehend it, it is not God.’”

BENEDICTION: Redeeming Sustainer, visit Your people; pour out Your courage upon us, that we may hurry to make welcome all people not only in our concern for others, but by serving them generously and faithfully in Your name. And may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God, that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.