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### Stumbling Through Faith

John 6:60-69

Professor of biblical criticism, F.F. Bruce, wrote, "Many of those who listened to Jesus during his public ministry found some of his sayings 'hard', and said so. It is all too easy to believe in a Jesus who is largely a construction of our own imagination - an inoffensive person whom no one would really trouble to crucify. But the Jesus whom we meet in the Gospels, far from being an inoffensive person, gave offence right and left. Even his loyal followers found him, at times, thoroughly disconcerting. He upset all established notions of religious propriety. He spoke of God in terms of intimacy which sounded like blasphemy. He seemed to enjoy the most questionable company. He set out with open eyes on a road which, in the view of 'sensible' people, was bound to lead to disaster. Many of Jesus' sayings are hard....He suggested that it would be good to reconsider things that every reasonable person accepted. In a world where the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong, where the prizes of life went to the pushers and the go-getters, it was preposterous to congratulate the unassertive types and tell them that they would inherit the earth, or better still, possess the kingdom of heaven." *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*

Our faith tradition is founded on the teachings of the radical Jesus of Nazareth. Though we prefer his teachings when they are kind and comfortable, the truth is that much of what he said not only disrupted the culture in which he lived, but continues to unsettle us in the culture in which we live.

In the passage we encounter in the Gospel of John this morning, Jesus has just concluded teaching using these words, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." John 6:53 These words made no sense to the people who heard them. Not only did they find it difficult to understand, they were afraid that if they did understand it, they would find it unacceptable. Many of the people who listened to Jesus that day took his words literally. They were offended. Later teachers concerning this passage implore us to see that Jesus was speaking spiritually, not literally. However, on that day, Jesus has spoken and in John 6:60-69 we find the reaction to his teaching.

Read the passage/Prayer

On this day with Jesus, the words of kindness and comfort turned to words that were challenging and distressing. Jesus expounds upon the teaching as he speaks to the fact that the spirit gives life and the flesh is useless. But many of the people gathered had ears that would not hear and minds that were closed. His words that day became a stumbling block for many and instead of engaging Jesus, instead of opening their minds and hearts, people walked away.

"...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." It is a powerful word to us on this fourth Sunday of Lent. We have all encountered stumbling blocks to our faith. We all can offer teachings, practices, and expectations in our faith that confound us. Most

of us can point to an aspect of our faith and say, "I don't believe that or I don't think that is true, that makes no sense to me." The questions before us this morning are, "What is too much for us to accept?" and "What stumbling blocks are in the way of our love relationship with God?"

The body of Christ, the church, this church is comprised of people; regular, struggling, searching, sinful people. We are no better and we are no worse than those who gathered to hear Jesus teach on that day so long ago that is recorded in the Gospel of John. Generation to generation, the followers of Jesus are confronted with his teachings and the listener is left to accept or deny or continue to follow and seek understanding.

Faith is a matter of trust. What is in the way of placing your full trust in the love of God for you?

Many a time in the last twenty-five years of my ministry, an individual has come into my office to share a burden that they carry. They may share that they love Jesus, but cannot accept the concept of the virgin birth. There may be some of you sitting in the pew this morning who struggle with this very teaching. We are well educated, intelligent people, can we really believe in immaculate conception? That concept may become a stumbling block in one's faith journey. Others have come to me and shared that they understand the brutality of the crucifixion, but cannot conceive of the idea of resurrection. As we approach Easter, there may be some of you who also struggle with that concept. How can Jesus live beyond death? The Resurrection has become a stumbling block for your faith journey. For some, these teachings are accepted as just a part of the mystery of God in our midst. For others, however, these teachings are obstacles to the overall message of God's love and grace.

In this day and time, we are a people of information and intellect. If we cannot understand it, then we cannot accept it. So deeply invested in trusting our own intellect, it is extremely difficult for us to encounter the mystery and wonder of the Divine.

The teachings of Jesus were not fully understood, the people listening could not make rational sense of the teaching, and many walked away from Jesus that day. So many, in fact, that Jesus turned to his devoted twelve disciples and asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" What is your answer?

What is it that is a stumbling block in your relationship with Jesus? What is it that Jesus has asked of you that is just too much for you?"

We are called to be shaped not by the world's values, but by the spirit of God within us. God's ways are not our ways. God asks of us to live in a new way, a way that will confound the wisdom of this world. There are expectations in the practice of faith. We gather to worship God each and every Sunday of the year. Is 52 weeks of worship too much for you? Is 52 hours out of over 8,000 hours a year too much to offer Jesus? Is 48 times a year too much? Is 24 times a year too much? Is worship a stumbling block in your relationship with God?

Is taking time to be in prayer every day too much of an expectation for you? Is praying once a week or better yet daily too much to ask? Has prayer become a stumbling block?

Is the study of scripture on a regular basis too much of an expectation? We have five televisions in our house. Five! I have read that the average American family watches nearly five hours of television a day. In our house, you can see or certainly hear a television in any room in the house. Is our addiction to television a stumbling block in our faith relationship with God?

I do not know what you find as the hard teachings of Jesus. God is ready and willing to reveal God's self to us all day, every day, but we are busy, distracted people.

Trust involves a leap of faith. We take that leap, knowing that we cannot understand God fully and yet realizing that the leap itself is our only real hope in this life and beyond this life. As the Psalmist writes, "To Thee O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in Thee I trust." (Psalm 25)

In his book, *Ruthless Trust*, the author Brennan Manning tells a painful and yet powerful story from his childhood. These are his words and I quote, "One snowy night when I was six years old, my father returned home from a hard day of job-hunting and asked my mother how we boys had behaved. Pointing to my brother, Rob (fifteen months older than I), she said, 'He's incorrigible. I want you to march him down to the police station right now. Tell the cops to put him in jail and leave him there. My father did just that. I knelt on the broad windowsill with my nose pressed against the glass, hoping against hope that my brother would return. Half an hour later, my father came walking up the street alone. The terror of rejection and abandonment gripped my heart. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Trembling, I realized that there was no one to protect me. I was utterly alone. I knew that I would be next. Then I saw Rob about thirty yards behind my father. He was making a snowball. The inner panic subsided a bit, though I was still scared and shaken. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I climbed down from the sill, assumed the macho position of a little-boys-don't-cry six-year-old, and pretended disinterest in a traumatic event that haunted me for years." This incident and others with Manning's mother became stumbling blocks in his relationship with her and his ability to trust until years later when he was an adult and he had a vision of his mother, he imagined her as a six year old, kneeling on the windowsill of an orphanage, tears streaming down her face as she begged God to send a family to adopt her. He writes, "Suddenly all the anger simmering within me at my mother, all the resentment I had felt because she hadn't been there for me as a child, disappeared. Sobbing, I asked her forgiveness...the greatest enemy of trust in my life was disarmed."

Jesus asks us to trust God no matter what. Jesus asks us to place God central to our lives and to spend our days open to the revelation of God in our midst. Like Brennan Manning, we will find stumbling blocks that get in the way of our trust. Some of those stumbling blocks may have to do with the difficult teachings of our faith and some of them will center in the practices of our faith. Some of those stumbling blocks may have to do with betrayal of trust in relationships here on earth. Yet, we are asked to identify the stumbling blocks and instead of walking away, find a way to maneuver up and over and around those blocks so that we can become ever more open to the love that God holds for us. We are asked to follow even when we do not fully understand, to respond to the Divine love that envelops us.

Jesus asked the twelve disciples if they too were going to walk away from him. It was Peter who answered. Peter who had his own struggles with the difficult teachings of Jesus responded, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." It is the perfect

answer for that day and for this day. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" There is no one else. There is no greater love. There is no more powerful grace. There is no more forgiving nature. There is no greater resource of hope and peace and justice and joy. Even when it is difficult, even when our great minds cannot comprehend, even when you ask us to move out of our comfort zone, even when you demand of us to be in relationship with those we fear, we choose you. You are our Lord and our God. You are the source of our salvation from our own self centeredness. Like Peter and the other disciples, we choose you. Help us to acknowledge the stumbling blocks that keep us from you and allow you to overwhelm those obstacles with your love.

I close with these beautiful words from a contemporary Christian hymn entitled, "I Stand In Awe" by Mark Altrogge.

"You are beautiful beyond description  
 Too marvelous for words,  
 Too wonderful for comprehension  
 Like nothing ever seen or heard.  
 Who can grasp your infinite wisdom?  
 Who can fathom the depth of your love?  
 You are beautiful beyond description  
 Majesty enthroned above.  
 And I stand, I stand in awe of you.  
 I stand, I stand in awe of you.  
 Holy God to whom all praise is due,  
 I stand in awe of you."

We are like six year olds sitting at the window still afraid of what the world might hold, hoping against hope that you, O God, will come and rescue us. Inspire our trust, calm our spirit so that we can grasp that you have already come for us. You have already rescued us and ask only that we give you our hearts and our lives so that we will radiate your love in this world.