

PASTOR'S NOTES CONGREGATION ASSEMBLY, JULY IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 2019

Maybe you have had a conversation like this: "You know," a friend said, "I used to have faith. But some things happened in my life that made me wonder if what I had was real. People done me wrong. I lost absolutely everything. The only thing I have left is literally my guitar and my old truck, and now I have to sell my guitar. I read through the Bible in search of some foundation. I needed to know if what I thought I had was real. And I came to the conclusion that I don't have real faith. I think I'm one of those that have to be slaughtered for someone else to be saved. You know, like in the book of Job. All Job's children were killed and at the end Job finally got to see and know God better. So God's going to do what God's going to do and I'm one not intended for His blessing. I'm okay with it if that's the way It's supposed to be. I'm just not one of His chosen ones. What if I'm an Esau? You know, the Bible says, "Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated." After stunned silence, usually come another question, "Do you have anything to say?"

The dark side of life sees many Christians with great struggles, fearing the same things: "God did not, could not, love me." Many have had the times when souls thought they knew God but then they see the ground open up and everything they thought and knew suddenly and completely swallowed up. Gone. When and if this happens to your friends and family of faith let's remember Bible history.

Remember John the Baptist? How he spent his entire life preaching Jesus and then was arrested? Think about it! Here's a guy who from the womb was connected to Christ Jesus. His life's purpose was to proclaim the Lamb of God. He saw heaven ripped open and the Spirit of the living God descend on Jesus in the form a dove. Then John finds himself in prison. In the darkness, waiting for his head to be served on a platter, John begins to wonder... what if everything he had believed his entire life was a lie? And in that dark hour, John sent one last, message to Jesus. Shaken to his core, broken, John's disciples were tasked with just one question: "**Are you really the One?**"

What Jesus said in response to John is very important. It's so brief, it's easy to miss; but if you've been in that stormy place with John the Baptist, these words become your lifeline. **Jesus said, "Blessed is the one who does not STUMBLE on account of Me."**

God chose His words carefully to convey His word and His will. And boy! Like always the Holy Spirit packed a lot into that word! **Skandalon, stumble**, is from a word that describes a part of an animal trap. It is the moveable trap-stick (bent sapling) of a trap. And it eventually referred to the trap itself, something that caused one to stumble or fall. It is the same word to describe a large underground rock that is sticking just a little bit out of the ground. It causes a **stumble**.

Jesus Christ applies this Word to His great work of salvation. Jesus' mission was contrary to the expectations of His culture. Therefore many rejected Jesus and chose to go with their own feelings about what God was all about. But in rejecting Jesus, in their rebellious stubbornness, they refused to trust in Jesus. Eventually they even blamed Jesus and His Word for their own rebellious lack of faith.

This word, **skandalon**, does not talk about hurting someone's feelings. **Stumbling** means, "to cause a person to distrust the only Person, God Himself, who alone is worthy of complete trust and ready obedience." *That's what stumbling is.* And THIS is the word Jesus used on the way to the cross. Jesus said all the disciples would "fall away" or **stumble**, on account of Him. Matthew 26:31. Same word. Jesus revealed they would all **stumble** in stubborn unbelief. Yet even then, Jesus warned and encouraged Peter, "I have prayed for you, that your faith when you have been returned, strengthen your brothers."

But the awesome nature of the living God is on display in His Word. You see, **stumbling**, like any sin, doesn't have to be permanent. This is the amazing mercy and love of God's Gospel in Jesus Christ: No matter what evil has been done to us, No matter what evil we have done to others and forsaken Good in the process, No matter what dark nights we have seen, No matter the fear, the loneliness, the unfairness, No matter our own faithlessness, or our falling away, no matter the depth of our own sinfulness- it all comes down to **God's** character.

Is Jesus able to forgive, relieve, remove, pardon, enliven the dead? Can and does God keep His promises? The Scriptures are rather blunt, **“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you faultless in the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and to all eternity. Amen.”** (Jude 1:24-25).

Jesus our Good Shepherd calls and seeks me because of His love, not my performance. Jesus is stronger than my dark circumstances. Jesus, the Savior finds me and, joy of joys, there is always a way back, carried and guarded on my Shepherd's shoulders.

Think about headlines of the day, weeks, year, the headlines of my life. I easily see the depth of sin, pain, deep wounded-ness in and all around me. But Jesus saw even more and even darker sins even. And into this sinful mess of hate and rebellion, Jesus was born to rescue people, redeem and free people. And He did exactly what had been planned and promised with His crucifixion and resurrection.

Yes, when one is constantly attacked for their Christian faith, how hard that is. The Old Testament Israelites, John the Baptist and even Jesus' disciples: Disillusionment, in each case, for a short time, skewed their perspective of God. They let the dust and tears and darkness of the moment of the moment trip them to stop believing the One who is completely worthy of trust.

It caused them to **stumble**.

So many things in life tempt us to withdraw, reject, doubt, stop believing in God's revealed perfect, unconditional love for us. That's natural, right? Who could blame us? But here's the kicker. Remember that word for **“stumble?”** The word that means “to **cease trusting** the One who is absolutely worthy and deserving of our complete trust and obedience?” The word is **“skandalizo” in Greek. As in scandal.**

Do you see? It is NOT the scandal “thing” that is done TO US. The scandal, the horror and shame, is to stop trusting the Lord our Savior God, the only One who is perfect and perfectly worthy of our trust. Jesus died for all people. Yet, even God's own family of faith do not trust Him who so loved us!

So we go back to His Word, the Bible, again and again. Hear God's great love and mercy that softens the hard places. Chunks of hard cynicism and godless pessimism loosen. The blood of the Lord Jesus washes and cleanses away my doubts. I understand daily God is totally trustworthy. Jesus has revealed He is personally and continually praying for me and my faith, even when I am hammering nails of doubt into His love for me. God has His purpose for all my difficult times. My heavenly Father is slowly stretching me into trusting Jesus just a bit more.

Today you will be reminded how we God's word strengthens our faith and extends God's kingdom of grace here. God's at work in teaching families through our school, Sunday school and Bible Blast weekend; the upcoming sharing of an Ecuador missionary, Pastor Nathan Schulte, next week, the ongoing Bible classes and worship opportunities, the work done to keep up facilities and plans for next years' blessings.

God's at work in His Word and Sacraments including adopting little Kennady Davis baptized this morning. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, cares for us He gathered here today, and also those unable to worship with us because of illness or distance or other circumstances. God continues to bless us with reaching people through the web of the internet and the web of friendships.

In all of this, there is not a single speck of dusty reason to doubt God's everlasting kindness and continued blessings in Jesus Christ. In the words of God recorded in Jude, **“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you faultless in the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and to all eternity. AMEN.”**

From my family to you and yours, happy amen-ing! Alive in Jesus!
Pastor Tullberg