

### **Mark 9:38-50**

<sup>38</sup> John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone<sup>[i]</sup> casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” <sup>39</sup> But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. <sup>40</sup> Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. <sup>42</sup> “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,<sup>[k]</sup> it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup> If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell,<sup>[l]</sup> to the unquenchable fire.<sup>[m]</sup> <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.<sup>[n][o]</sup> <sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,<sup>[p]</sup> <sup>48</sup> where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. <sup>49</sup> “For everyone will be salted with fire.<sup>[q]</sup> <sup>50</sup> Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?<sup>[r]</sup> Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

### **“Stumbling Blocks or Building Blocks?”**

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Anyone who has children knows that favorites come and go on a whim. A passion for purple might suddenly be replaced by the love of all things orange. Chicken nuggets are the only acceptable lunch 3 weeks running, only to be rejected completely in week 4. Barbie dolls are in, and then they are out. Webkins are all the rage, and then they are abandoned on the closet floor. All of these were true in our house, and I suspect you can tell similar stories. But this was also true: Lego building blocks were a constant. They were always welcome as gifts; they never went out of fashion; and for some members of our household (Scott) they are never outgrown. As a parent, I’ve always been a fan of Legos. They are fabulously gender neutral; they inspire creativity and problem solving; they don’t break easily; they don’t make noise; they don’t require batteries. A single bin of mixed sizes and colors of Legos can provide unlimited fun.

Put I've also developed something of a love-hate relationship with Legos. Legos end up everywhere: under the couch cushions; in pockets of clothing in the laundry; in the dog; occupying every bit of spare shelf and table top space (because we can't take them apart when we've worked so hard to build them). But the worst? The worst is when they end up nestled down into the carpet, camouflaged, in the hallway between your bedroom and the bathroom. I have never hated Legos more than when I have discovered them in bare feet in the middle of the night. That is when you hope your children are not around to observe what come out of your mouth.

The truth of Legos, and life, is that the same thing that serve as a wonderful building block can also serve as a stumbling block.

Last week in the text that Scott read, Jesus picks up a child, and while holding that child in his arms, he offers his disciples a teaching – a building block, if you will – about how to live as his disciples in the world: the first shall be last and the last shall be first; whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” For John, this wasn't a building block; it was a stumbling block on the path toward his own perceived importance. He is part of the inner circle, a beloved disciple, and that gives him a certain amount of status. And, apparently, he liked that status. So when Jesus begins this conversation about the humility required of leaders, John does what so many of us do when confronted by an uncomfortable truth: he changes the subject.

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” He calls Jesus teacher, but he hasn't done a very good job of being a student. Was he even listening at all? Jesus is talking about humility, and hospitality, and compassion - the powerful serving the weak like an adult cares for a child. And John tries to turn it back around to authority and power – and who is close enough to Jesus to wield it.

I imagine Jesus having one of those deep breath trying not to roll his eyes moments with which teachers, parents, and supervisors are so familiar. Like a good teacher, Jesus brings his students back around to what he was trying to teach. This time he takes a slightly different approach: “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Since they don't seem to be getting it, Jesus engages in some hyperbole. Hyperbole (according to Miriam-Webster) is “extravagant exaggeration” to make a point. You can almost feel Jesus frustration as he directs their attention back to the child he holds and, in colorful terms

articulates the importance of what he is trying to teach them. His illustrations may be vivid and colorful, perhaps even a bit offensive, but they are articulating the same message he has been trying to teach them all along: you are not better than the other person (whether they follow me or not, whether they possess your power and knowledge or not) and your arrogant belief that you are will not be a building block for those you are trying to lead in the way of faith. Your pride will be a stumbling block.

Take note fellow Christ-Followers: all these centuries later our pride is still a stumbling block. Consider the wonderful building blocks Jesus taught and demonstrated for us:

- In this text Jesus demonstrates **hospitality** by welcoming a child into the presence of his inner circle, by holding that child in his arms. Hospitality is a wonderful building block for faith. Hospitality communicates welcome, acceptance, and belonging.
- In this text and others throughout scripture Jesus teaches that our power as people of faith is intended to be used to lift up the weak and weary, and to care for the tired and the poor. Exercising **compassion** is a building block that builds up community.
- In this text Jesus demonstrates the power of **conviction**. He believes that what he is trying to teach is so important he will keep trying until his students get it. As people of faith our convictions compel us to keep striving for peace and unity when it seems like everything is against us.

But these building blocks – hospitality, compassion, conviction – can become stumbling blocks, too! Consider, if you will:

- **Hospitality** and **Compassion** can become stumbling blocks when they are reserved only for a few, or if a community of faith demands adherence to a particular criterion for being worthy of hospitality and compassion. Consider the times in history that churches (generally speaking) have restricted hospitality or withheld compassion based on race, class, marital status, or sexual orientation. Our biases and prejudices are a stumbling block. They keep us from seeing and recognizing the inherent worth of other children of God. And when those other children of God see our prejudice on display they are probably not going to want to get to know the Jesus we claim to follow. We become the stumbling block for them.

- Our **convictions** can become stumbling blocks when we hold so tightly to a principal that we forget that its about people. The child that Jesus held in his arms was more than an object lesson for his disciples. That child was a person Jesus was inviting into the circle of his love. We can be against all kinds of things on principal, and still love people. You might believe pineapple doesn't belong on pizza, and still the love the person who does. You don't have to make a big deal out of your anti-pineapple principal. You can order your pizza half with pineapple and half without and still share a meal together full of love and laughter. I challenge you to take out pineapple and pizza and insert whatever prejudice you wrestle with. And imagine what it would look like to welcome that person with whom you disagree into the circle of your love. How would the relationship changed if you put love for that individual ahead of your conviction? You can still believe what you believe *and* act and speak in a way that loves – that is a building block instead of a stumbling block.

We have a choice, people of God. Jesus is trying to teach us something important. We can learn from him and be building blocks in the way of peace that Jesus is building in our midst. Or we can reject his teaching, clinging to our prideful pursuits that become stumbling blocks sowing discord. Whatever you choose, remember: the children if your life are watching you and they will learn from what you do. No matter how many times they change their mind, or how many different paths they explore, or how many mistakes they make, or how many mistakes you make, may your love be the constant in their lives that builds them up and keeps them from stumbling.

Alleluia! Amen.