

“From That Time On”

*A sermon preached by Rev. Daniel Smith
At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
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The Lesson: Matthew 16: 21-28

This summer, I had the great fortune to do some kayak-camping up in Maine. A friend and I set out for three days to a group of islands a few miles outside of Muscongus Bay, well South of Bar Harbor. The area was beautiful – wide open sky over deep blue water with rocky shored islands scattered here and there, and the mainland way off in the distance. And, it was practically deserted but for the seagulls, osprey, seals, porpoises and lobster fisherman. We had our pick of which islands we were going to camp on – the Maine Island Trail Association maintains simple “leave no trace” campsites on several. We paddled around for a bit the first and did a little research, looking for the perfect spot. It didn’t take us long to realize that the place to be was on the several acre Crow Island. The campsite was up on small bluff that poked out of a pine tree canopy and overlooked the water. The only problem with the island, the only drag of that entire trip even, was the fact that this island offered no safe place to land. No sandy beach. Just giant rocks laid out on an incline. And wouldn’t you know, we arrived at low tide. We decided the campsite was worth it so we stumbled out of our boats onto the slimy seaweed coated rocks. Suffice it to say, it was a serious project loading and unloading the boats of our food, water and camping gear. Over the course of those three days, I lost count of how many times I wiped out on those rocks. . I still can’t believe I didn’t break both of my ankles on those stumbling blocks of granite that surrounded that island. Our extra efforts were worth it though. We had literally stumbled onto what must be one of the most beautiful campsites on the entire East Coast.

From the rocks of Maine to the Rock upon which Jesus would build the church. Just a few lines before the passage we just heard, Peter answers Jesus questions “Who do you say that I am” by calling him the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus commends Peter for his faith, says “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Peter is a name which means rock. Jesus then promises Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, a sign that Jesus wants him to be a leader of the church. We can imagine Peter is feeling pretty good about himself right now, maybe a little too good. For in the passage we just heard, where Jesus first speaks about his pending public suffering and death and resurrection, Peter rebukes him. “God forbid it, Lord. . .this must never happen to you.” Suffering? Death? No way! Jesus snaps back, essentially saying “Go to hell, Peter.” If you can’t handle the reality to which I’m being called, to which we’re being called, get out of my way. Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me and to the church! The Greek word for stumbling block here is *scandalon*. Translated literally, it’s a stone that trips someone up, and one that causes a scandal of a certain sort. Peter is "Rock" for the new Christian community one second, and is a stone of its stumbling the next.

Among many other things, this passage invites us to consider what are the stumbling blocks in our own efforts to take up our crosses and to be the church of Jesus Christ. Where do we find ourselves tripping up as we walk the hard way of our suffering servant Jesus? Where is the church not merely a Rock foundation for God’s kingdom on earth; where is it a scandalous stone of stumbling, standing in the way of God’s purpose of love and justice?

Outside our doors, there are people whose ankles and hearts have been broken trying to negotiate their way across the sometimes-treacherous shores of the institutional church. William Sloane Coffin has noted that “The stumbling block for most sensitive nonbelievers (and I would add believers too) is not Christ, but Christians, not God but suffering and the fact that the church in its hour of prosperity has worked so little for its alleviation.” Stumbling block indeed. Churches of every stripe are getting tripped up as we try to find a firm and even biblical footing when it comes to gay rights, abortion, and end of life issues, and the Middle East, and or more ecclesiastical matters about who can be ordained to the ministry, and who can take communion. Catholics are stumbling. Fundamentalists are stumbling. Episcopalians and Methodists are stumbling. The United Church of Christ, the denomination of which First Church is a part, is stumbling. For different reasons, we are all stumbling and so much that we can imagine Jesus saying to us too “Get behind me, Satan.” You’re getting in the way. I need you to be stepping stones, especially of the poor and marginalized, not stumbling blocks.

Well, fortunately, the difference between a stepping stone and a stumbling block is all about when you see it. I recently had a conversation with Rebecca Gifford, a staff organizer for the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. We discussed what she believes are some of the major impediments for churches like ours to draw nearer to one another, to God and to act together out of a shared sense of purpose. She mentioned that we fear getting involved real controversy. She spoke about a distorted sense of freedom that comes out when we find ourselves saying “I have the right” to individual expression, to criticize and even pull back even if doing so trumps collective action for the common good. Even in its sketched out form, this list of impediments, or stumbling blocks if you will, begins to summarize why the church’s public ministry is weaker than it can and should be.

Another key impediment she mentions is deferred leadership. We so often believe “someone else”...someone with more time, someone with more experience, someone older or younger ... will take responsibility for drawing us together, mediating our difference and for proposing creative solutions. Peter’s rebuke of Jesus partly exemplifies this. He knows if Jesus has suffering and death ahead, he probably will too. Suffering and death? Not you, Jesus? Not me? God forbid it! Jesus says, get over yourself, Peter. Get thee behind me, Satan! Or be the leader that God is calling you to be, with a clear mission in life to bring good news to the poor and to bind up the broken-hearted. The liberal church is desperate to have leaders right now...and that includes every one of us! We need to be leaders among leaders who will act together to share Christ’s radically inclusive love for the poor, for our neighbors, for our enemies. Many of you, I know, consider yourselves to be leaders of our congregation and please let me say...you do a beautiful job. Together, we *are* leaders of *a* church...but how many of us consider ourselves to be leaders of *the* church, that is, the church of Jesus Christ? Were you thinking you already have enough on your plate? Think again! I fear a part of the reason why the liberal church seems so silent in public discourse is because in the midst of all our in-house and institutional maintenance of our individual congregations(as necessary as that is), we’ve failed to cultivate public leaders, people who are willing and able to speak about their faith convictions and act on them in the public realm. We cower away from appearing too religious in public and in so doing have let the religious right define what “the” church is. Bill McKibben wrote in a recent Harper’s Article “The power of the Christian right rests largely in the fact that they boldly claim religious authority, and by their very boldness convince the rest of us that they must know what their talking about. They’re like the guy who gives you directions with such loud confidence that you drive on even though the road appears to be turning in a faint, rutted track.” Though “they” may not convince

“us”, he’s got a point when it comes to their boldly claiming religious authority. For all its many faults, the religious right does not want for Christian leaders. And we are stumbling over ourselves and over them in part because we are not sufficiently training and claiming leadership. Have we grown so accustomed to the idea of following Jesus that we’ve lost sight of the fact that to follow Jesus is to be a leader?

In case you think I’m just casting stones here, I have a story of the ways this dynamic of deferred leadership has played out in my own life. I was recently part of a small gathering of young, progressive Christian clergy from around the country. We were all under 35 and graduates of Harvard Divinity School – a Baptist from Milwaukee, a Disciples of Christ minister from Texas, an Episcopalian from Pittsburgh, a Presbyterian from Fayetteville, Arkansas where Wal-Mart is headquartered. Among other things, we did a lot of commiserating about the state of Christianity in our country. By the end of our time together, we began planning a conference that will include a larger circle of young and progressive Christian clergy and lay leaders from around the country. We want to learn how to better and more publicly communicate a faith-filled platform of our political convictions in ways that we hope will combat the reigning rhetoric of the religious right. We need a shared language of our values, complete with media sound bites. We know of no other gathering like this, of young leaders across denominations and across the nation meeting together to talk strategically about how to expand our public and prophetic witness. We plan to invite veterans of the cause, like Rev. Jim Wallis who just wrote the best seller “God’s Politics”, the seminary trained Bill Moyers, and the writer Bill McKibben, that they might pass on their insights and experience to us. And do you know what? All the while as we were dreaming about this “think tank” style gathering, I could not help but think “I don’t have time for this”. Someone else can do it, someone who’s not as busy, someone who has a real silver tongue and can be the perfect spokesperson. When it comes to the impediment of deferred leadership, I’m as easily pegged as the next person. In the end though, I committed to doing what I can to make this conference happen because I believe its precisely this kind of network that could be a part of what is needed to turn the tide of God’s politics in this country.

I wonder what examples come to your mind...what opportunities you all can see for yourselves to be leaders in *the* church of Jesus Christ. For some of you, it might require an identity shift. If you to think of yourself as having one foot in and one foot out the door of Christianity, maybe its time you get both feet in, claiming your role as a full-fledged insider, not in a church, but in *the* church. Be the change you want to see, right? Or how ‘bout this? Next time you introduce yourself to a new person, tell them your name and your particular occupation and then try saying “and I’m a leader in the church of Jesus Christ!”What’s that you say? You’d suffer some embarrassment? Could it mean death, at least to your social lives? Not me – I couldn’t say that? We know how Jesus would respond to hearing this Get thee behind me Satan! For as long as we’re shy when it comes to talking about Jesus, as long we’re reluctant to associate ourselves with *the* church of Jesus Christ, the religious right will continue to define our religion for us, along with our country’s political landscape. So I ask you again...what would it look like for you to be a public leader in the church? Are you willing to take up that cross, to set aside what others will think, to no longer be a stumbling block of God’s purpose but a stepping stone? As a D.C. based street organizer named Lisa Sullivan would say, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for”.

From that time on, we are told, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must endure great suffering, bearing the cross of shame for God’s love, truth and justice. From this time on, may we

show Jesus that we embrace our calling to be not only his followers, but leaders of the church that bears his name. Our extra efforts to turn our stumbling blocks into stepping stones will be worth it, even if we need to break some ankles on the way. So much more than the keys to a pretty campsite on an Island, you'll be given the keys to the very kingdom of heaven! "Not me?" you say? Yes, you! Where are the real leaders, you ask? We are the ones we've been waiting for! Our vocation is clear! With God's help, may our waiting stop, and may we heed Christ's call. Amen.