What Gets in the Way?

Generally I am a reasonable neat person. In my house and here at church, there may be a pile here and there, a dirty dish on the counter or a couple of cans ready to go out to recycling, but it’s not too bad. In my offices, both here and at home, however, it’s another story. Maybe because my offices are creative spaces, places for concentrated work, maybe at home no one but Brian ever even see my office, they are a mess. It’s an organized mess. I know where things are. But books and papers and stacks and boxes accumulate around my chair and my desk until either I can’t find anything or they tumble over and collapse. So getting around in my office can sometimes be a challenge. I get up, deep in thought or half asleep or in a hurry to get somewhere and I end up tangled and tripping wondering what it was I just stumbled over. I create my own stumbling blocks.

The stumbling blocks in my office are physical, and those are bad enough. Anyone who uses a walker or a wheelchair or has trouble walking can tell you what a frustrating experience it can be just to get across a room or across the street when the passageways are too narrow, or someone has left a box or a piece of furniture in the way or when there are no curb cuts. Even a step as little as three inches can be an insurmountable obstacle for some folks. Without meaning to, sometimes we put stumbling blocks in other peoples’ way.

As difficult as physical stumbling blocks can be, the stumbling blocks we create with words and attitudes are just worse. “You can’t do that – you’re a girl.” “What college did you graduate from that makes you think you’re qualified.” “People like that shouldn’t be allowed to do those things.” “Those people don’t even speak English – what do they know.” “You aren’t a real Christian”. Stumbling blocks like these are often dropped casually in the road by the people who say them, but to the people who hear them they are devastating and dehumanizing.

Then there are the systemic stumbling blocks – the rocks of racism and class and sexism that are built into the system set up to make sure that some groups of people get ahead while others are left stumbling and struggling to get up the mountain of blocks.

Yes, we are good at putting blocks in each others’ way in our own efforts to get ahead. But when we do that, we get in the way of the reign of God.

In this morning’s gospel, the disciples had just come back with a report that someone with no credentials – “someone who was not one of us” was casting out demons – disciple work – in Jesus’ name. What probably made that even worse for the disciples was that not too long before this, they had tried to do the same thing and failed. So their noses were out of joint, and they came tattling to Jesus. “Rabbi, he was teaching in your name, but we stopped him.” Whoever this person was – and we know absolutely nothing more about him than the disciples tell us – they were trying to put a stumbling block in his way. They saw him as an unauthorized interloper who had no business about their business.

The point the disciples missed is that the business this unknown disciple was about was not *their* business, but Jesus’ business, God’s business. So the stumbling block they were trying to put up wasn’t just to block this person. They were also trying to block the work of God’s kingdom, even if it was what seemed to the disciples to be the best intentions in the world.

But Jesus, as he so often did, turned the way the disciples saw things upside down. Instead of putting stumbling blocks in the way, he cleared a path. Instead of building walls to separate, he opened a door to let someone in. “Don’t stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of me.” Then comes the sentence that stops us in our tracks. “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” That statement is so stunning that when the gospel writer Matthew ran across it, he changed it around into the form that is more common and easier to accept: “Whoever is not for us is against us.” But that’s not what Jesus said. Jesus said that if people aren’t actively working against you, then the assumption you should make is that they are on our side.

In our divided country, almost no one is making the assumption that “whoever is not against us is for us” these days, and the result is that we withdraw into ever smaller splinter groups assuming everyone else is the enemy and do our best to put stumbling blocks in each others’ way. This happens even in the church, where we make judgments and assumptions about other denominations or where those in conservative congregations line up against those in progressive congregations and accuse each other of not being “real Christians.”

But what if we started looking for a different way? What if instead of looking for adversaries we started looking for partners, instead of looking at what divides us, we looked for the places where we could find common ground? What if we stopped putting up stumbling blocks to keep others, especially the weakest and most vulnerable among us, from moving forward and instead started offering and gratefully accepting simple, life-giving gifts like a cup of cold water?

Let me remind you of three quick stories, stories you have been part of and know well, where that has happened.

In our presbytery, the Presbytery of Philadelphia, there was a time not so long ago when at every presbytery meeting there would be a fight. What we were fighting about varied – often it was about ordination standards – but the battle lines were predictable as we lined up and politely hurled epithets at each other. Seven or eight years ago, that changed. Leaders began to realize that by our behavior we were betraying Christ and destroying the church. So one or two brave moderators began to model a different way. Near the end of developing that different way, a Transitional Leadership Council was formed, intentionally including people from many perspectives within the presbytery. Through the work of that group and the continuing work of our executive presbyter Ruth Santana-Grace and our clerk Kevin Porter, a new day has come in the presbytery of Philadelphia, a day where we deal with difficult issues openly but with love. Instead of assuming that whoever isn’t for us is against us, we do our best to believe that everyone who isn’t against us is for us, and the whole attitude of the presbytery has changed.

Here at Tree of Life, we have become partners with a non-profit, the New Avenue Foundation, whose goal of serving people with disabilities is strictly non-religious, yet because of the common ground we find in serving vulnerable people, we are able to work together to do Christ’s work of creating a genuinely caring community at Our Community Cup Coffeehouse. If we had said, “But they aren’t a Christian organization”, this ministry would never have happened.

Here in the Springfield community, for something like thirteen years now, Christians who can’t even get it together to worship together for Thanksgiving have dropped all denominational barriers to work together for the common goal of feeding our neighbors through the Souperbowl of Caring. In a model that doesn’t exist anywhere else across the country that I know of, everyone from the Catholics to the Pentecostal Assembly of God congregation works together to collect over 20,000 items of food for our local food pantries each February. If any of us had said, “But they aren’t real Christians, we can’t work with them” this wouldn’t happen.

These are all examples from within the church of what can happen when we stop setting up stumbling blocks for one another and let God’s kingdom come. This last week has been incredibly painful and divisive on the national scene, with the pain spilling over into the personal lives of many people, as on all sides stumbling blocks were hurled into the path, leaving all of us with no good way forward. Surely there is another way. What if we all, wherever we are, stopped just setting up stumbling blocks for one another. What if we searched for common ground, living as if we believed that whoever isn’t against us is for us. What if instead of acting like an exclusive club shutting others out we opened the doors and sought to create community that included even people different from us in fundamental ways. A quote from the Clergy Coaching Network says, “In a world torn apart by anger, hatred and conflict, we have the privilege of being living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds.” Here and now, in this place, we to build that different way, to build Christ’s way, so that, as Jesus taught us, we can show that love to the world and live in peace with one another.