

“It’s a Scandal”**Mark 9:38-50****September 27, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

About 21 years ago we got the kids their first dog: a boxer by the name of Molly. We live on two acres with most of it in the back of the house so we decided to get an invisible fence where she could run-off her boxer energy. If you are not familiar with these, you bury a wire in your yard, encircling an area in which you want the dog to stay. Then the dog wears a shock collar. Now if the dog gets too close to the wire, the collar starts to emit a high pitched whine so that the dog knows it’s getting too close. But if the dog actually tries to cross the wire, it gets shocked by the collar. The area a dog can wander is limited by the circumference of the wire and what we didn’t consider is that the kids ran *all* over the backyard, into the woods and especially to the tree house we built at the bottom of our hill. So it wasn’t more than an hour of trying out the new fence system that the kids—not having shock collars—ran beyond the periphery of the wire circuit. Molly was a smart dog and she had learned almost immediately that the signal was telling her to go no further. But what some of you might not know is that boxers are really just like furry kids themselves and her desire to join her human littermates down the hill was overwhelming for her. So we tried yelling to the kids to come back, that the temptation was too much for the dog. But they were too involved in their favorite game—Spaceship—where the tree house transformed into an intergalactic vessel taking them to strange new worlds. The kids were oblivious to the dog and impervious to their parent’s calls. Molly was shaking with both desire and fear and before we could grab her she decided to go for it. She leapt the wireless fence and yelped at the pain. But now she was free and she bounded down the hill to the spaceship...

treehouse. Erin and I were amazed that this dog had seemed to consider her options, her desires and her fears and then—seemingly making a choice—she took the hit in order to be with her kids.

But then came the real problem...Once she had gone beyond the wire, there was no way she was going to come back. We'd call her but the collar would beep a warning signal if she got near the house and there was no way she was taking that hit again.

Eventually we got rid of the system: the dog wouldn't stay in the yard and once—when she entered the house with the collar accidentally left on—we learned that pressing the buttons on the TV remote sent a shock as well. Horrified, we threw the collar in the trash that day.

We were remembering Molly the other day...the story of the invisible fence and her love of the kids. I found that as I considered the events of this week: the news, the visit of the Pope, the life of this church, I would return to the story of Molly. I considered the pain she felt in taking that leap of love for her family. But I also considered her fear of returning to the house because of the pain she experienced. She'd been hurt and she didn't want to get hurt again.

That's what Jesus warns his disciples about in this passage today. We have to be careful with one another, because if we hurt each other, it's hard to come back. The apostle John comes to Jesus and tells him that there was someone casting out demons in Jesus' name and they tried to stop him. That's when Jesus admonishes them saying "whoever is not against us is for us." This raises the question right from the start about who has authority in the name of Christianity? Who has the right to invoke the name of Jesus? And, it wasn't long after the death of Jesus that the problem arose of opposing views in the name of Christianity with each side claiming the authority of Jesus.

This was certainly the situation in Mark's community. In Mark's day, thirty to forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were many different groups of Christians. Some were predominantly Jewish, others were from Gentile background. Some groups were centered in the city, others in the country, some were taken from groups of slaves and the lower classes, others from the educated groups of Roman society. These differences in life circumstances often led to differences in their understanding of Jesus. They differed on salvation and about who was a real Christian and who was not. But when we get caught-up in these questions and struggles, and we still get caught up in them today, we lose the very essence of the message in Mark. Jesus is clear that he doesn't care who this mysterious outsider is; he turns the question to the people right in front of him (verse 42) how are *they* doing harm?

And then Jesus goes on to warn them about the stumbling blocks they place in front of others. Jesus seems to be saying that we shouldn't worry so much about who is outside of us (or against us), but instead we should take care not to hurt those who are inside, those who are for us. He is concerned for the little ones, which may mean children or the newer Christians. Those new to the church, but also refers to those who are vulnerable, those who have less power. We shouldn't place stumbling blocks in their paths. In Greek the word that is used several times throughout this passage is *skandalon* from which we get the English word "scandal." A *skandalon* is an obstacle that people trip over, but it's not just something that we left out without thinking, like a shoe on the bedroom floor. A *skandalon* is something that we place in another's way intentionally. Sometimes we believe it is for good, for protection, like a wire fence that keeps the dog in the backyard.

But more commonly, a scandal, in the vernacular sense, is something revealed to trip someone up, embarrass them, to cause them hurt, make them lose power and a scandal or skandalon, makes it difficult to recover your standing or your footing.

It is all too easy to complain about those we perceive to be outside. Not just in the church. Xenophobia—a fear of those who are different than ourselves—runs rampant. We see it in the news, most recently regarding Muslims, but certainly not just Muslims, nor does it stop with religion: Race, sexuality, gender-identity, political party (and the list goes on) when we perceive difference we seize up because we don't trust it. But Jesus tells us to focus on what *we* do because when we focus on what's wrong with the outsider we place stumbling blocks in their paths, we hurt the “little ones” and sadly, we often do it in his name.

It's hard to hear Jesus' words and ask ourselves, “What stumbling blocks are we putting in front of other people? What ways do we hurt someone, hurt enough that they go away and don't come back? What scandals do we cause because we are threatened by another?” Just as Moses was more concerned about God's will being done rather than who was doing it, is that our concern as well?

Do we have things we do that are unwelcoming to someone new? Do we so value our friends here in church that we ignore someone we don't know yet? Do we so cherish our Presbyterian way of doing things that we don't hear the suggestion of how something might be done better? Do we have a problem with someone who doesn't look like us, dress like us, have the right kind of education, make enough money, speak the right way? Do we put stumbling blocks in front of people so that they will leave and not come back? See, it's not so easy to turn our attention to what we do, it's easier to focus on that guy out there who doesn't follow us.

But that's not so easy to do—focusing inward rather than identifying what's wrong with someone else. I had lunch at the Presbytery meeting in Benton Harbor a couple of weeks ago with a fellow minister this last week who said “You know, there's one part of the traditional Presbyterian service that we never do; we never say a prayer of confession.” He went on to explain that early in his ministry a congregant complained about how the church always made him feel bad about himself and that he didn't come to church to feel bad. That stuck with my friend so strongly that he never did another prayer of confession. I understand that; I believe people should leave church feeling good and empowered and affirmed. I would also agree that John Calvin and Presbyterians in as a rule can be a bit heavy-handed on sin and depravity.

Still, I disagree with this colleague, I think confession is the very path we must travel to find authentic happiness. Being the best person you can be is a discipline, it is a daily practice and confession reminds us of our need for constant awareness of how we live in this world. We know the times when we have been selfish or uncaring. There are times we need to be washed clean, we do need to be forgiven. In order for us to be affirmed we need to know that we are loved and accepted and doesn't that mean forgiveness?

This week our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrated Yom Kippur, in many ways the holiest and happiest day in the Jewish calendar. It is the Day of Atonement, a day of prayer and fasting in which each person is supposed to atone for their sins against God over the last year and then celebrate God's forgiveness. But there is something that has to happen before that. Erev Yom Kippur, the day before the Day of Atonement is a day set aside for asking for forgiveness from

each other. Before one approaches God to be reconciled, one must approach one's sister or brother. But so often we don't want to look at those things, those things that implicate ourselves. Confession requires work. Forgiveness requires work. It is knowing that we need forgiveness and casting ourselves on the grace and mercy of God. It is how out of gratitude we ready ourselves to eventually reach out to others in healing. To take leaps of faith out of abounding love. To strengthen our inner core when others place stumbling blocks before us so that we don't retaliate with stumbling blocks of our own but practice forgiveness, even for the person who never asks for it. To be that safe place where one who was once hurt can return without fear.

Like a lot of you, I spent some time this week watching reports of the visit of Pope Francis to the United States. I was touched by his speech to the Congress and to the United Nations, but I was especially touched by the prayer service at Ground Zero. Up on the dais to lead the service was Pope Francis and a couple of Cardinals, but there were also representatives of all the major religions of the world. There was a rabbi and an imam and a Sikh leader and a Buddhist monk and a Hindu priest and others that I didn't recognize. In their spoken prayers there was the affirmation of their diversity and appreciation of it, but then a rabbi led the prayer of St. Francis, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." And then near the end one of the cardinals called for neighbors to exchange a sign of peace with each other. And the camera followed Francis as he embraced the rabbi and the Muslim imam and the Buddhist monk and all the others. We can be together, we can love each other, those embraces proclaimed. We don't want to so hurt each other so that someone is afraid to come back. We can be a safe place. We can stop putting stumbling blocks in front of each other and embrace each other instead.