

That's Your Problem

In the name of him who is with us when we gather in his name, dear friends in Christ: I hope you noticed the sermon title for this morning. If not, take a look at it now. And ask yourself, what do you think it means? At first glance, how do you understand those words?

The reason I ask is that it's one of those short phrases which takes on an entirely different meaning depending on which word gets the stress. If I stress the second word, and say "That's your problem" it means it's a difficulty *you've* got to deal with and that I don't want to be bothered with. Too bad for you. Leave me alone. But if, on the other hand, something you own isn't working right and you don't know why, say your car or computer or the plumbing in your house, and you have whatever it is examined by a professional, when he figures out what's wrong he's going to stress the first word and say, "That's your problem." And this is good news. It means he's about to fix it. So, depending on the stress the phrase can be unfriendly and adversarial *or* cooperative and helpful. Now, here's *my* question: which way did you take it at first, positively or negatively? I'm guessing that the majority of us thought of it in that negative, adversarial sense: That's your problem. And *that*, my friends, *is* the problem.

It's the same problem we see in this morning's Gospel. The disciples of Jesus, who we know were constantly bickering among themselves about which one of them is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, bring their burning question to Jesus. They want to know what the evaluation criteria are. They see themselves in competition with each other, and they want to know what kinds of tremendous things they can do to earn merit in the sight of God and so gain for themselves glory and honor and, most importantly, power and position over the others. They all want to be king of the hill. And, of course, you achieve that by fighting your way to the top and shoving everyone else back down.

And *that's* the problem. Those very attitudes and desires of the heart are diametrically opposed to the ideals and standards of the kingdom of heaven. Their question about who is the greatest in God's kingdom and their motive behind asking it—*that's* what stands in the way of them achieving greatness in the kingdom. And to help them understand how backward their thinking is, Jesus gives them an object lesson. He calls a young child over to himself – probably a boy of four or five years – and he has him stand in the center of the group. Here's the model for you, he tells them. You're thinking about becoming great in the kingdom as if you're already well on the way. That's mighty presumptuous, because I've got news for you, "unless you turn and become like this little child, you'll never even enter into the kingdom."

It was the verbal equivalent of a full body slam. But as crushing as it was, it was necessary. You see, in the Greek text, where Jesus says "unless you turn and become like a child" the verb is passive. It should read "unless you be turned and become like a child". The point is you can't turn yourself; you must *be* turned or *be* changed by someone else. And in this case that someone is Jesus, who, by these sharp words of rebuke, is attempting to do just that.

What does he mean to become like a child? Well, first let's make sure we know what he doesn't mean. Some people have guessed that it means "innocent" or "sinless", as if young children were incapable of doing anything wrong. That's just silly, as anyone who's ever raised a child can tell you. Children know very well how to sin. They do it quite well, and no one has to teach them how. It comes to them naturally because they are born of sinful parents. Besides, if sinlessness were required to get into the kingdom of God, obviously no one would qualify. The gates of the kingdom would be shut to everyone.

So, what *does* it mean to become like a child? A couple things. First, very young children know where they stand in the pecking order: namely at the very bottom. There's a natural humility there. They do not presume to be able to lead or to make decisions for the family. They haven't got that kind of ambition. Although they may protest when something isn't to their liking, in the end they must defer to mom and dad's greater wisdom, authority, and (if nothing else) size and strength. Second, young children are very teachable. Most are eager to learn. They realize they don't know how things work in the world, which is why they pepper their parents with the constant question "Why? Why? Why?" More importantly, though, children are dependent. They can't grow or prepare food for themselves. They can't make, wash, or mend their clothing. They can't build a house for shelter or defend themselves from enemies and wild animals. In short, they need someone to take care of them, and they know it. They look to their parents to do for them what they know they cannot do for themselves.

This is the key: God is our Father and we are his children, always one hundred percent dependent upon him. The very notion that we could do something for ourselves – especially something to advance ourselves in his eyes with our own strength or ability – is absurd. What's more, God is holy and righteous and we are steeped in sin. Therefore everything we do, even what we count to be good and noble, is in the judgment of God contaminated, filthy, and unacceptable. So to imagine that he looks upon our so-called good deeds with favor and wants to pat us on the back and give us the ol'attaboy is the worst sort of self delusion and an offense to God. We did not create ourselves. We didn't give ourselves minds capable of reason or talents and skills. These are gifts. We cannot save ourselves from sin. This required the sacrifice of God's Son upon the cross. He gave himself for us, the righteous for the unrighteous, to pay the debt we could never pay ourselves. And we can't even start ourselves on the right path by choosing to become a follower of Jesus and placing our trust in him. Faith in Jesus is a gift worked in us by the Holy Spirit when by God's grace we hear his Word. All these things are done to and for us by a good and gracious God who loves us for Christ's sake alone. All we can do, like little children, is to receive what our loving Father gives. And unless we understand exactly where we stand and how totally dependent we are upon him, that is, unless we are like little children, we are in danger of being excluded from his kingdom.

And this is why Jesus follows up with some warnings about how what we do or don't do may put others at risk of being excluded from the kingdom. And you may think, "Wait a minute! Aren't they responsible for themselves? Isn't it enough that I look out for my own faith and salvation without having to worry about others too? Why is it *my* problem?" To this sort of objection, the answer can only be "Have you understood nothing of what's been said?" Look: if you are 100% dependent upon God's work for *your* coming to and remaining in saving faith in Jesus, that means they are too. So no, obviously they are not responsible for themselves. They are incapable of being responsible for themselves. They are dependent – just like you. They must receive from God, just like you. And that means that you can play a part in either blocking them from receiving or helping them to receive. In other words: their problem? That's *your* problem too.

Jesus tackles two different aspects of this. The first is what's translated in our text as "temptations to sin" or "causing another person to sin". It's not the best translation. The actual word is "scandalize". It means to trip up or to put a stumbling block in the way of someone else's faith in Christ. And it's important that we understand this: Satan is not so much interested in getting people to sin. Everybody sins. We do it all the time. But Christ died for our sins. The debt is paid. And we are forgiven of our sins when we repent and place our trust in Christ. So what Satan really wants is to get people not to trust in Christ, to not believe and confess that they are completely dependent upon Jesus and his saving work for us on the cross. *That's* what causes them to be lost. Now, one way to do that is to lure people into sins so repugnant and evil that they might be led to believe that God could never forgive such hideous crimes. And it's actually a perverse form of pride that says, "I'm past redemption. My sins are so severe that not even the

blood of God's Son could atone for them." Really? How highly such a person thinks of himself and how little he values Christ. But make no mistake, it does work with some people, and so Satan does indeed tempt people to sin. And we are Satan's agents – his helpers in this – when by our words or actions we encourage others to sin.

A far more effective method to stumble faith in Christ for the majority of people, however, is to get them to shift their trust in Christ and their dependency upon him to something else; namely to themselves, their good works, their strong spirits, their good intentions, their pious feelings, or their eagerness to please Lord. As we've already seen, we all naturally incline this way; so it isn't very difficult to push people over the rest of the way and get them to fall.

And there are a lot of ways to do it. Some are quite blatant, like when someone teaches that it's not just trust in Christ alone that saves, but to faith must be added certain good works and actions on the part of the believer. In such a scheme salvation becomes a work of cooperation between the believer and Jesus. He does his part and I do mine. The trouble is that since Jesus' work is already complete and perfect, the believer is forced to fix attention on *their* part of the deal. And because the works of the believer will always be flawed and limited, they're always left to wonder if they've done enough or if they've done them well enough. This will either lead to pride (yes, I've done it) or to despair (oh, how small and pitiful is my contribution). But either way, the person is not dependent upon Jesus anymore. They're looking to themselves.

A bit more subtle an approach is to teach people, yes, your good deeds don't count – it's all Jesus and what he did – but what you've got to do is make his saving work apply to you by your decision to accept Jesus as your Savior and make him the Lord of your life. This, in reality, is the same error as believing in adding good works to faith in Christ, it's just that the good work that's needed is making the right decision. Now instead of looking at the quality and number of good deeds, believers are forced to hang their faith on the quality and sincerity of their decision. This too leads to either pride (good for me) or despair (I keep turning back to sin; I can't seem to make my decision sure enough). But once again, they're not depending on Christ; they're depending on themselves and how clever or spiritual they were in choosing to accept Jesus.

A third way to stumble people is to teach them that there are two classes of Christians. There is, on one hand, what you might think of as first stage, entry level Christians. These do indeed have faith in Christ. They'll be saved. But that's all. They'll have the cheap seats in heaven. Ah, but there's another level of believer. These are the super spiritual ones that are running up the score and earning for themselves a higher place in the heavenly kingdom by their efforts to please the Lord. They pray harder and more often. They blanket their everyday speech with "God-talk" and manage to turn every phone call into a witnessing opportunity. Mostly through their efforts to make themselves something great in God's kingdom, they stumble those with simple, pure, dependent faith in Christ and his atoning work on the cross by causing them to believe that they're not doing enough – that something more than faith in Jesus is needed to be a real Christian.

And I'll mention one more way to stumble believers – little ones who believe in Jesus. It's what I call the independent spirit. This is the Christian who was, once upon a time, a serious student of God's Word; but who imagined that somewhere along the line he or she came to a place where their faith was mature and stable enough to continue on its own without the ongoing nurturing of the church, its Sacraments, or the supervision and instruction of its leaders. This is nothing more than pride and foolishness. It's the opposite of true Christian maturity, which is marked by an understanding of just how weak and dependent upon Christ, his Word, and his Sacraments the believing soul is. But when someone says, "I don't need to go to church", or worse, when parents teach their children that going to church to receive Christ's Word is of secondary importance (or less) by their words, their spotty attendance record, or the kinds of things

they allow to take a higher priority, they are stumbling the faith of little ones who believe in Jesus, and they are placing themselves at risk of being excluded from the kingdom not just for their own misplaced faith, but also for the sins they are committing against others by leading them astray.

And this really is the point of today's Gospel reading. Instead of thinking about how to get ahead in God's eyes and how to be considered great in his kingdom, we should be thinking about others and how our words and actions might be causing them to stumble and fall from faith. Like Ezekiel in today's Old Testament lesson, we've been appointed watchmen for each other. And if something any one of us says or does leads another to turn their trust to anything but Christ and Christ alone, then the guilty one will have to answer for it. When you create faith problems for others, that's your problem. It's a big problem. And you need to repent.

But that leads me to the other aspect of how Jesus says the problems of others are your problems too. It happens when you see a brother or sister in Christ who's falling or has already fallen into sin. And understand that what we're talking about here are not the sins which we all commit and for which we repent and ask for forgiveness each day. We're talking about ongoing unrepentant sin, like when someone you know is involved in an extramarital affair, or is stealing from their employer, or is engaging in the use or manufacture of illegal substances, or is pursuing a homosexual lifestyle – these are just a few examples I could give. The problem is the ongoing and unrepentant nature of the sin. And the reason it's a problem is that it destroys faith. Such sin, allowed to continue without challenge or resistance, will eventually drive the Holy Spirit away and whatever saving faith the person has will die. And because sin by its nature deceives the mind, blinds spiritual sight, and hardens the heart, the person who is involved in such sin is not going to recover on their own. They need help. If you are aware of the problem, they need your help. Christian love demands that you do this for them.

And this is why Jesus tells you to go tell them their fault – to confront them with their sin; and if they hear you and repent, great, you've gained your brother. If not, you don't give up. You take two or three others to stand as witnesses to the truth and bring them back. And if that fails, you get the whole church involved – because their problem is the problem of all who believe in Jesus. And if they won't hear the church's call to repent, then in love, we, the church collectively must speak the truth and tell that person that they are outside the Christian faith and the forgiveness of Christ as long as they do not repent – as long as they are not turned and become like little children, trusting in Christ for everything. And please understand this is done not to hurt or condemn them; but to help them to see the peril in which they've placed themselves, and so save them from eternal hellfire. And yes, it may cause you a few problems. But then, they are your problems: problems the Lord lays upon you for your good and for the good of others.

And he knows a lot about bearing the problems of others – for he carried all of ours: all our sin, all our shame, all the suffering we rightly deserved, he carried them to the cross. He did it to give us new life and to make us like him. And now, as his faithful followers, trusting him for all things, he tells us how we are to avoid creating problems of faith for others, and how we are to help rescue those who are experiencing problems with sin. We're all in this together. Therefore repenting of our past mistakes in this regard, let's follow his lead and work together in Christ to eliminate all our problems. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!