

Sermon 9-30-2018  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Mark 9  
By  
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You may recognize this picture from a few weeks ago. We used it when we were talking about Jesus confronting the Jews about being offended about the teaching that we must eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood. We made note that the word used for "offend" was like this pearl-clutching, to be scandalized. In fact, the word used there was *skandalidzo*. And that word shows up again today. If you take a close look at our Gospel reading from Mark, you probably wouldn't be able to figure out where it is, and that's because it gets translated differently in this spot, because it gets used differently. *Skandalidzo* in this case gets translated as "*stumble*." A pretty key word in the passage, right? So, why the different translation?

I think it is because of the direction of the scandalization. Back in John 6, the Jews are scandalized because of the teaching of truth that offends their sensibilities. This is the pearl-clutching. This use in Mark is different. If you look at the context, you can see it. Especially look at verse 42. The ones who are scandalized are the little ones who **believe** in Jesus. They've already got the belief. They've already got the trust. But it is the action of the others that causes these little ones to stumble in that trust. They are scandalized not by the teachings of Jesus, but by the **actions** of his followers. This follows in the next few verses, where the appendage is the doing something wrong in order to cause the whole body to be scandalized, to stumble.

Verse 42 is the one that gets me, though. This is interpersonal. This is one Christian causing another to be scandalized by their behavior, to stumble, and to possibly even lose faith in God. In the church, we often wonder where all the people are going. Our attendance is lower. There are fewer people to volunteer. Yet, the population around us keeps rising. In order to figure that out, we need to put our ears to the ground, and hear the stories of those who have either never been a part of the church, or more importantly, in this case, hear from those who were once a part of church, but now are no longer.

That's what I tried to do a few years ago when I read the book *You Lost Me*, by David Kinnaman. Kinnaman is president of the Barna Group, a religious research organization, which focuses on trends and topics within Christianity. The premise of the book was finding people who had grown up in the church, but *left* it sometime in high school or early adulthood. There were two major categories: nomads and prodigals. Nomads have simply wandered away from church. They may consider themselves Christian, but faith is not central to their life anymore, possibly even very peripheral. Prodigals are those who have fully left behind the church. They take two paths as well: those that are more head-minded have come up against intellectual concerns that they could not reconcile with faith, while heart-minded prodigals have had experiences in church that have greatly hurt them, either interpersonally or theologically.

So, in these two categories, there are really three reasons: lack of commitment, lack of ability to question, and lack of care. And I want you to notice something in my summary: those are all the things that we as the church have done to these people, or left undone. The reason has the most

direct connection to what Jesus is telling us in verse 42 is the heart-minded prodigal. They perceive the church as a place where they have been hurt, because they have been hurt. Church conflicts have hurt many, many people over the decades, some of you who are sitting in this room. Even in the ways that we have communicated truth, we have not communicated care. We have seen each other as enemies, and people have left because they didn't want to be seen that way anymore. The enemy mindset shows up with the head-minded prodigal too. They may not even see the church as a place they can bring their questions, because when they do, too many of us have rejected the questions off-hand, declaring questions to be a lack of faith, or providing answers that dismiss the seriousness of the questions. And the nomads? They see how important our lives of faith are to us on Monday through Saturday too. They see many of us just on Sunday, and maybe don't see what the rest of the week looks like, not just around the church building, but in everyday moments. They don't see because we aren't teaching them what it means to have faith be a part of everything that we do.

These groups, the nomads and the prodigals, are the little ones that Jesus is talking about in verse 42. Through our actions or inactions, we have caused them to stumble. We have caused them to lack trust in the promises of God. And because of that, we have millstones around our necks, and we are sinking. Who has caused the church to decline? The church has. Not just the culture, not just the people leaving, not even just terrible pastors. The church has caused it by our actions, our attitudes, and our indifference to the real lives of people. So, what do we do? We go to verse 50. "Have *salt* among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." Remember, salt is the stuff that preserves. Instead of causing damage, it edifies. That's what we are called to with each other. Discuss questions. Be kind. Have peace. Show them active faith. Build active faith in yourself. This is what grows the church, not flashy signs and coffee shops. We are called to show people that this is a place where we treat people like people, not like inconveniences.

But how can we, when we are poor miserable sinners? All this has come about because of the sin we find within the church. We know what we should do, but we cannot. So there is really only one thing to do: turn to Christ. He is the only one who can take our sin and replace it with life. And he has done so on the cross. This is how he created the church, our church, the Christian church in the first place. He gave his own flesh and blood for it. If we are seeking the good of his church, the good of his people, and the good of the world, we have to start with him. We have to start with confessing our sin to him and the ways that we have hurt his mission. We must repent, and when he has forgiven us, he will set to work in our hearts and lives. And this should happen every day. It's not only for our sake, it's for the sake of those who surround us. Let's take the scandal away. Let's heal those who have been hurt. AMEN.