

## Our Turning Point

What causes you to stumble? I have several answers that I have received to that question over the years, but wanted to note a few.

Some have suggested that stumbling is just part of the natural process of aging. Our bodies and minds don't work to the same degree as they did in our youth. Indeed, sometimes our bodies seem to be waging war against us.

Another suggested we stumble by not living in the moment -- perhaps reflecting on the way things used to be, or anxious about what might come.

Another friend suggested that stumbling might be a by-product of diminishing vision. Maybe we just aren't seeing things as clearly as we once did.

One dear friend just came straight out and asked me if I was okay -- and I told them, yes, I'm fine. Context is important. The circumstances surrounding a situation.

One perceptive person asked, "Is this for a sermon?" Because stumbling does have a biblical history, does it not?

It is interesting to note that the 21st chapter of Matthew is rarely read or taught in the way in which it was written. The chapter opens with loud shouts of Hosanna and all the pomp and glory of our Palm Sunday service as Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem riding on a lowly donkey.

It is the flash point near the end of his earthly ministry, and the 'whole world' is abuzz about this wandering minister who cures the sick and challenges religious authorities.

But the mood quickly turns as Jesus enters the Temple overturning the tables of those who profited from the poor -- selling sacrifices when all God truly sought was a humble and repentant heart.

The religious leaders were quick to find fault -- perhaps a sign of an aging tradition or diminished vision of how God was at work in this present

moment. They questioned his authority and sought a means to silence him, but like good politicians weighing the mood of the crowd decided to wait for a more opportune time.

So, Jesus tells the crowd another parable, not a sweet little parable about a sower and seed or a good Samaritan, but a parable that leaves us wondering:

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard---and took measures to keep the property safe and productive: he added a fence and wine press and even watchtower -- everything to help sustain it.

Then the owner entrusted his property to tenants who would care and harvest the fruit the vineyard produced. The tenants did not own the vineyard. They had not planted the grapes or provided the tools in which to encourage an abundant harvest. But they rejected the authority of the owner, and plotted revenge so that they might take the vineyard for themselves even if it meant taking the life of the owner's son.

So, Jesus asks, what should the owner do? Clearly the tenants have rejected the authority of the owner. What do we do when faced with rejection? There are few among us who have not felt the sting of rejection at some point in our life.

Researchers have noted the long-lasting effects of social rejection can cause "a cascade of emotional and cognitive consequences... Social rejection increases anger, anxiety, depression, jealousy and sadness."

Studies show that rejection reduces performance on difficult intellectual tasks, and can also contribute to aggression and poor impulse control.

People who routinely feel excluded have poorer sleep quality, and their immune systems don't function as well as those of people with strong social connections. A person can physically survive a solitary existence. But that existence is probably not a happy one.

Being rejected hurts. That's not just a metaphor. Researchers have found that there are areas of our brain that light up in an MRI when we

experience rejection in the same manner as when we experience physical pain.

Perhaps that is when we stumble. When the fear of rejection outweighs the risk of offering an opposing view. When the anxiety of what might befall us or the remorse of the comforts, we've left behind seem overwhelming. Or just the thought of isolation -- of not being accepted for who we are.

We watch our young face the challenges of peer pressure--just trying to fit in-- lessons that we carry throughout our lives. The 21st Chapter of Matthew might very well be blueprint for our 21st Century dilemma of 2023-- how do we keep from stumbling in a world turned upside down?

We have been planted in one of the most idyllic spots on earth -- with plenty of fresh air, vast areas of green space in which to roam, and the beauty of our surroundings.

On the surface all seems as it should, but in the past few years, a bully has entered the scene -- overturning our normal routines and way of life. An unseen bully that has cost thousands of lives, changed the way the youth are schooled, our places of employment, even the attendance at our churches.

And the domino effect that Covid 19 has created among society in general, homelessness, mental illness medical care, and I could go on and on

Perhaps you know someone who is feeling rejected by any of this; and even perhaps that someone is you.

But what if, the defining moment of this dreadful state of affairs we are facing now, was not the universal impact of Covid-19, but a worldwide commitment to live as the people of God? To bear fruit --united as the body of Christ.

I'd like to offer three thoughts to help us through these days:

**Be aware.** Be aware of your surroundings --of the people you love...of your neighbor, or the person standing beside you in the grocery line. Remember

that none of us know what it's like to walk in the others' shoes. So, be kind to each other, and to yourself.

I have a personal habit of trying to smile at every person I encounter in my daily life. If we make eye contact, I'm quick with a hello. If you wave, I'll wave back. No, I probably don't know you, but that's where friendships begin.

**Embrace this moment in time.** We may not have the ability yet to solve all of the worldly problems, but we do have the remedy to live in peace through the Prince of Peace. Pray without ceasing -- pray for our young people, our elders, pray for this moment in time to be a renewal of our baptismal vow. Pray for those who've never heard the Good News of Jesus Christ--and then pray and ask God how you can be an instrument of Christ's peace.

**Widen your view.** Today is celebrated as Thanksgiving or Harvest Sunday. It is a reminder of our unity in Christ--that each one of us who professes Jesus Christ as Lord is united in one body--the Church -- each one of us the building blocks chiseled and bonded together through the Holy Spirit. It is a reminder of our Harvest, no matter how small, and our Thanksgiving for God being a part of our lives.

In these days of with all of the changes and the approach of winter heightening our sense of isolation, it's important to remember that we are not alone and that the challenges of these times are so much more than the isolation that was created with the Covid pandemic.

Researchers have determined that social rejection can hurt as much as physical pain. Perhaps we're feeling that today, but imagine the owner of the vineyard and the depth of pain experienced at the rejection of those he entrusted with its care, and the price paid by his only Son.

What if 2023 is remembered not by what we have lost, but what we have gained -- not by what has divided us, but what has brought us together -- from the care of health providers and volunteer visits to those isolated.

What if we remember 2023 as the year we turned more fully to God and to the call of His Son, Jesus Christ -- through all the pain that has been, and yet to come, to bear fruit worthy of God's Kingdom.

For the harvest is plenty, but the workers are few. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen