

Sermon Stumbling Block to the Weak

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, January 31, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A conversation I've had with a brother in Christ, whom I will call George, took place years ago that still haunts me to this day. It was a pastoral conversation where I tried to stave off his imminent departure from the congregation, the one that I formerly served in Montreal, a congregation where most families were immigrants from Taiwan. I've known George for over thirty years. He was a friend, a faithful Christian, a valued co-worker who stood by me during the time when the church was in a gut-wrenching period of conflict and division. We had prayed together, lamented together and rejoiced together over many twists and turns, over a number of years. Yet we were at a crossroad, on how best to build back the congregation.

I had outlined the vision a more welcoming community of faith that is multi-cultural, multi-lingual and intergenerational. The universal vision of Isaiah guided my thinking where people from all tribes, all nations shall gather on Zion, the mountain of God, and bow down before the Lord. I had argued that such an overarching eschatological vision could be realized here on earth, at a local level, or at least we could give it our best try.

George had agreed on most aspects. As a keen reader of the words of God in the Scripture, he understood Isaiah without needing my explanation. Yet the one thing that he couldn't overcome...he was a true Taiwanese, and he couldn't stomach the thought of his congregation being overrun by newcomers from China.

I knew exactly what he was referring to; I knew the cultural war that was being fought in his heart; I knew that his Christian faith — though strong — was coloured, tainted, by years of animosity between Taiwan and China, where technically the civil war that started in 1949, never really ended. George understood his own unclean spirit, asked me to stop 'preaching to him', as loving one's enemies has its limit, and he had simply reached his. We blessed each other in prayer, and parted way that day.

That conversation haunts me still to this day. That is why this week's lectionary reading, particularly the passage of Mark 1:21-28 caught my attention. How I wish, just like Jesus, that I could teach as one having authority, and not as any another scribe.

Authority, or *eksousia* in Greek, is understood as power, weight, and the ability to influence, to exert control. In Judaism, it often is used in the context of describing spiritual power. When Jesus went into that synagog in Capernaum on the day of sabbath and began to teach, his ability to influence was evident to those gathered. We have seen the same ability of Jesus in earlier passage, when he called on the first disciples — Jesus called, they immediately followed. Now we are witnessing that same authority in his teaching. Those in the synagog were amazed, including a man with an unclean spirit.

Notice that man was among those in the synagog, a place set apart for the teaching of the Torah, and for worshipping the Holy One of Israel. That man with an unclean spirit wasn't foaming at the mouth, eyes bulging, blood-shot. He didn't look crazed, with smelly and unkept cloth or dirty fingernails. In fact, he probably looked quite respectable, devout even, and he did not look out of place in the assembly of the righteous. However, his uncleanness was seen and known by Christ. In term, he saw and knew Christ. In verse 24, the man cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Ironically, the righteous in the assembly did not recognized Jesus, but the one unclean knew who Jesus is - the Holy One of God. Jesus rebuked him, ordered the unclean spirit to come out of the man, and immediately it did. A new teaching? maybe. Authority, yes indeed.

Apostle Paul taught also, with a different kind of authority in his letter to the Corinthian congregation — authority demonstrated not through power but humility. The Corinthian community was in the middle of a cultural war. There were so many battle fronts that readers of the letters could be excused for losing track. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, I count at least 15 major problems, including factionalism, incest, prostitution, divorce, remarriage, chaos in worship, women praying and prophesying, inequality in communal meal, collection of money, and so on.

The issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols seems arcane to contemporary readers, for our concern is mostly about nutritional value and cost. During my recent sabbatical rest from active ministry, I took up cooking. Partly due to the fact that I had a lot more time to spare, partly

because I enjoy the activity. The process of selecting raw materials, of combining spices, of experimenting with different heating methods have all intrigued me. I love checking out recipes online, or put together my own creation. The result seems mostly appreciated by Daisy and the boys. I am glad that I've also took the time to teach Justin and Neo about cooking, as they are now sufficiently proficient to cook for themselves — ensuring certain independence.

When it comes to selecting meat, the experience of a modern consumer is marked by choices — of kosher, or halal, or organic, or free-range or simply unspecified factory-raised. If you are not satisfied with the supermarket experience, you could always find a local friendly butcher who will prepare the meat the way you like — choices upon of choices.

However, that was not the case in the Greco-Roman world of Apostle Paul. Meat, all meat were prepared first not by local butchers but by local priests, sacrificed to various deities. To eat or not to eat such meat, may mean very little to Christian believers of Gentile background, but to those of the Jewish background, who were brought up to differentiate between what is ritually clean from unclean, it was a matter of eternal life or death.

Into this choppy water of cultural storm, Paul waded in. He first lay out what united the two groups, laying down the theological foundation that “there is no God but one”, therefore “no idol in the world really exists”. Eating meat sacrificed to idols will not result in eternal damnation, thus not eating such meat will not ensure eternal salvation. However, Paul was pastorally sensitive also, to those who were not comfortable in his position — those weaker in faith. He argued that even though his conscience is clear, even though he had outlined in earlier chapter that “all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful” (1 Corinthians 6:12), so if eating meat sacrificed to idols could become a ‘stumbling block to the weak’, then he would rather choose not to do so.

The metaphor of a stumbling block is interesting. Usually, metaphors derive from something actual, something real in the day-to-day world. The power of a particular metaphor rests in its ability to connect with the experience of average people, then to alter it to a different use. So human being as bipedal creatures understand stumbling, we all trip and fall from time to time. But what is a stumbling block? Who would actually put out a ‘block’ that ensnares others to trip and fall?

During my sermon preparation this past week, as I was openly musing about this, someone from the congregation quipped, “Ahah, you

never had to experience a younger brother!” That is true, I am the youngest among my siblings. It is doubly true that Sue, my older sister, would surely agree, as I had put out obstacles in our much younger days, just to see her trip and fall. I was a very naughty and mischievous boy. But I digress.

The metaphor of a stumbling block, to the best of my research, probably derive from cobble stone roads that are in a state of dis-repair. As mortar between larger stones wear down, the uneven blocks become even more prominent, unsuspecting travellers are thus more likely to trip and fall — thus stumbling blocks.

Consequently, spiritually speaking, we may not be aware of existence of a particular stumbling block. It is not intentionally set to snare someone. It comes about through a prolong period of wear-and-tear, of lack of care, and it only becomes evident when someone actual trips and falls.

However, once we become aware of such a stumbling block, Apostle Paul explained, right at his opening argument of “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”. Knowing about the right doctrine of faith in itself is not enough. Rather love — love is what can truly build others up. Invoking the metaphor of a building block to resolve the dilemma of a stumbling block, we are reminded that love is that foundational stone of the Law, of the Christian faith. Before one could even imagine to love thy enemies, perhaps one needs to take seriously the commandment to love thy neighbours, thy sisters and brothers in Christ.

I think of George often, I still maintain contact with him from time to time. The spirit of God continue to be at work in him, in me also, in all of us really. My former congregation went forward in the vision of Isaiah, in that universal and evangelical zeal, bringing the Gospel, the good news of Christ to many, including many newcomers from China. George went on to different congregations, not finding a suitable spiritual home, so he decided to make one of his own. He started a bible study fellowship to work with new immigrants to Canada. The last time we spoke, he admitted to me that many of the newcomers were those from China.

Somehow, the building block of love compels him, and the foundational block that is the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ powers over him. A new teaching? Not really. Authority, yes certainly.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.