

Message: “Turn Stumbling Blocks into Stepping-Stones”

God puts stepping-stones to heaven right in front of us.¹

Trudy writes, “A while back, I was helping to raise money to serve hospice patients who had no resources to pay for themselves, with the help of a group of young professionals known as Esprit de Corps. The group’s board of directors was made up of lawyers, CPAs, public-relations directors and banking specialists, all of whom were very compassionate, connected and caring.

Among them was a young man named Kevin, whom I thought especially wonderful. He was quiet by nature, always with a helping hand and winning smile. No task was beneath him - carrying boxes, decorating, moving props and anything else to make their events spectacular. They raised more than \$1 million for our hospice program.

Kevin was going through some very painful personal times, and he often spoke to me about them. He had a great mind and heart, and enough trust to bounce his thoughts off me. He wanted to know more about how God helps us through hard times. One day I received a card in the mail from him I still treasure. The cover showed Piglet and Pooh walking and talking. It read, “I just wanted to be sure of you.”

A year or so ago, a mutual friend asked if Trudy knew whether anything was wrong with Kevin. He moved and they’d lost touch. A few weeks later she heard Kevin had died in his sleep. His wife found him in the morning, looking ever so peaceful beside her.

The Piglet and Pooh card came to Trudy’s mind right away. She thinks Kevin heard about God again through the stories he loved to hear her tell years earlier.

The stepping-stones to God’s heart are right in front of us. Kevin heard about heaven, its beauty and its reward many times. He knew God created and loved him, and Kevin loved God in return. And Trudy could hear him saying to God, “I just wanted to be sure of you.”

¹ <https://guideposts.org/angels-and-miracles/life-after-death/steppingstones-to-heaven/>

What a great message when things don't go the way we wish they would! God can turn stumbling blocks into stepping-stones. All it takes is trust, an open heart and open mind to discover ways to overcome our own challenges and limitations and find the way to God's heart.

This is a marvelous message for today, as we reflect on Matthew 16:21-28 together. We're in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and the disciples. Last week, our hearts were lifted by the revelation of Jesus' true identity. After more than two years together, God's Spirit reveals Jesus as the Messiah. Praise God!

I think the group was talking as they walked on the road. When you're walking and talking, you need to watch where you're going so you don't stumble. A minute ago, Jesus told Peter he was a rock, solid and sure like a smooth road. Now, Jesus tells Peter he's a rock who could cause others to stumble like a rough road. That's a quick turn-around. What happened? Let's look at what he actually said.

Jesus says to Peter, *"Get behind me Satan! You are a stone that could make me stumble, for you are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts"* (v23). Jesus wasn't asking Peter to go away and leave him alone. Jesus was challenging Peter's thinking and what he said. Peter wasn't on the right path and he was leading others in the wrong way. We, too, can cause others to stumble in what we say and do.

How can we cause others to stumble? Offense can be given, taken or both. When we offend someone to the point where they doubt their faith or fall into sin, we're causing someone to stumble. When we take offense when no offense was intended, we can cause others to doubt and stumble. It's easy to take offense at another person when it's really the circumstance which is the problem. This is sometimes called being passively offensive. And when we offend someone in a difficult situation, we're offering bait for temptation and sin to take hold.

Peter was thinking God's thoughts when he said to Jesus, *"You are the Messiah, Son of the living God"* (v16). Yet now, only a minute later, Peter is thinking from a selfish perspective. Without realizing it, Peter is parroting the very words Satan spoke to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, *"I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world and all glory if*

you bow down and worship me. (And you won't have to suffer at all)" (Matthew 4:6,8; my paraphrase). They don't understand who the Savior is, like many of us. Peter just wants things the easy way, as do we.

Jesus rejects the temptation, not the person. But he knew this was an "ah, ha" moment, a teaching moment. He wasn't trying to shame Peter but to make sure they all understood. This is why Jesus clarified what he meant, speaking to all who were gathered around him: "*All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them*" (vv24-25).

There are two things which seem readily apparent. First, Jesus knows what's going to happen. He shares a lot of specific details. For example, taking up the cross is an unusual phrase. It's pointing to something which hasn't happened. Jesus is entering the season of his passion. He's in Caesarea Philippi, the furthest away from Jerusalem he'll go. God's Spirit reveals Jesus is the Messiah – finally. From here on, Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem and the cross. This takes about six months, which is the same amount of time we have between now and the beginning of Lent and our own pilgrimage.

Second, Jesus tells us the way isn't easy. Salvation comes at a cost. Jesus knows he will suffer and die. Like it or not, this is the path he is on, freely and willingly. It isn't about predeterminism or heroic effort. Jesus does what he must do because he loves us and wants to save us. Death comes before resurrection and new life. But knowing what's coming and being willing to endure it for the sake of others doesn't make the journey easier. The same is true for us. We are to freely and willingly endure the troubles which will come as we live for the sake of other people.

The Spirit has put it on my heart to remind us this isn't about our stumbling, but about how we can cause others to stumble, instead of helping them. When we turn away from the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, the orphan and those in need, we are a stumbling block. When we help them, regardless of the cost, we are a stepping-stone. When we are judgmental, demanding and selfish in the way we view and treat others, we are a stumbling block. When we are open, without fear

and taking risks in love, accepting others into our church, home and neighborhood, we are a stepping-stone. When we separate and divide, going our own way with those who think or look like us, we are a stumbling block. When we no longer ignore or deny others but accept and affirm the rich diversity of all God's children, we are a stepping-stone. May it ever be so.

I believe this is how we go from being stumbling blocks to stepping-stones. Peter is our example, a model. Jesus called Peter to follow him. By faith, he did, immediately. Jesus invited Peter to step out of the boat in the middle of the storm and walk to him on water. By faith, Peter did. Jesus asked, "*Who am I?*" And Peter was open to the prompting of God's Spirit, boldly saying, "*You are the Savior.*"

Yes, Peter had doubts. Yes, Peter asked questions. Yes, Peter was rash. Yes, Peter tempted Christ. Peter also went on to deny his Lord.

But Peter didn't go away. Peter had remorse. Peter persevered. Peter always turned back to Jesus with an open heart, willing to learn. And so, Peter saw Jesus transfigured into his glory on a mountain top. Peter ran ahead to look in and see an empty tomb.

And Peter saw the resurrected Jesus standing on the seashore, making breakfast, which led him to jump overboard and swim to shore. Jesus restored Peter there, on the shore, with love and affection. Peter took it to heart and shared a message of salvation and hope on the day of Pentecost. More than 3,000 heard, believed and were saved. Amen.

Peter got it. He knew there was only one person who could save his soul, Jesus. And faith drew Peter back, again and again. Despite his human limitations, each stumble became a step forward toward Jesus. The love of Christ found a home in Peter's heart.

What does this mean to us? We, too, can change from being stumbling blocks into stepping-stones of faith.

What might this look like? Let me offer a few suggestions.

Admit your wrongdoing. Stop playing the "accuse and excuse" game or being passive-aggressive or baiting people for a response. I'm not pointing fingers at anyone. These are behaviors we all do because we've

learned them and experienced them all our lives. The first stepping-stone offers the antidote to self-delusion. Admit the truth to yourself, to God and, when you're ready, to the ones you've offended.

Lean into forgiveness. Jesus forgave Peter. Jesus forgives you. And he taught us to forgive others for their offenses and forgive ourselves when we fail. When we turn back to Jesus, again and again, we find the stepping-stones firmly beneath our feet. Offer the same forgiveness to other people; help them find equally firm footing by grace. I invite you to seek out those you have hurt and make amends this way.

Care for others enough to put their needs first. When someone is going through a hard time, they don't need our self-centered viewpoint. Even when we may be trying to lighten the atmosphere with some humor, it isn't always appreciated. When someone is sharing their feelings or trials, try not to make it about you. And ignoring those who are suffering isn't any better. Listen, offer touch when appropriate, pray, and your presence will be appreciated. You may be invited back.

Jesus' way of life isn't easy, but no way of life is. Rather than watching those around us stumble along without hope, let's turn ourselves from stumbling blocks into stepping-stones by faith. When we follow the Lord together, we will find a life of faith, hope and love.

What a way to live!

Let us pray ...

Matthew 16:21-28 (CEB)

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on the third day. Then Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him: “God forbid, Lord! This won’t happen to you.” But he turned to Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stone that could make me stumble, for you are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives? For the Human One is about to come with the majesty of his Father with his angels. And then he will repay each one for what that person has done. I assure you that some standing here won’t die before they see the Human One coming in his kingdom.”