

PARADOXICAL STUMBLING BLOCK

Life is not a game.
Life is Not a game to separate the winners from the losers.
Life is not a game with God.

We should not follow the Biblical lessons to make God happy. They are not arbitrary rules to merely test our obedience.

Life is a game for Toddlers. Toddlers follow the rules because they don't grasp the complexity of life.

My grandson was very proud that he pleased his grandfather when he carried scissors the proper way. He didn't get the reason for the rule.

There are lots of rules.

Sasha, my grandson, was told not to jump on the trampoline when someone else was jumping; however, the reward for obedience was less than the lure to jump. He climbed up and joined in on the bouncing, and a rebound bounce caught him, tossing him higher than he could control, and he landed on face. He stumbled, and that was the consequence. Suddenly, life was so unfair, AND....the other jumper was to blame. He didn't understand the correlation, but he's only a toddler.

Another rule for him was to pick up his toys when he stopped playing with them, but.... that rule was also beyond his understanding.

He wanted to please adults, yet..... it is really hard to follow rules when the motivation is simply to be rewarded for obedience.

He was told that someone might step on them, breaking them or maybe tripping on them. I'm sure he thought, "well, just don't step on them because I like to leave them out."

One evening, his mother stepped on a toy, breaking it and hurting her foot. Sasha's choice was a stumbling block for another,..... and he felt the displeasure, too.

I think we all know what a paradox is.
Something that turns out to be a contradiction of the assumed meaning or intent is a paradox.

When we bet our life on a paradox, we will surely stumble.

Using hot water to clear a snow covered sidewalk seems to work,..... until it freezes.

Waging war on terror is not only a paradox, but it will cause many to stumble and fall because war / violence increases hate and fear in everyone.

I'd rather not participate in recalling the ten year anniversary of the 9/11 disaster; however, the media must not be the only narrator because everybody is stumbling trying to make sense of the story being told them.

I suppose most people believe the calamity is about bad / evil people, called terrorists,.... assaulting the good,.... and of course ... all the terrorists must be forced to lose in the game of life.....

What happened 10 years ago was terrible.

2,996 people died from the results of the four plane crashes.

It is dreadful when one person is killed, no matter who that person is, including Osama Bin Laden... or Saddam Hussein.

YET, **this** defining and pivotal moment in history is not about the loss of life.

In 2001, 29,573 Americans were killed by a gun. Nearly 10 times the total of the 9/11 event,.... yet... few were appalled? and where was the repulsion to resolve / to counter those deaths / to enact gun control?

The real impact ten years ago was the “pop” of the American myth of safety and self- righteousness. That myth includes the illusion that military might can keep people safe,..... that we are good, and anyone who assaults us is bad,... and whatever we do is acceptable because we are good. The paradox of doing bad things to produce a good is known as redemptive violence.

And, billions of people are still stumbling from all those paradoxes.

It didn't have to be that way.

Those who hijacked the planes did a horrible thing, but they believed they were right. They were responding to a bully, albeit responding poorly.

Too bad the US govt. refused to talk with Al-gaeda, back in the 90's.

Al-gaeda was judged to be bad guys, and not worthy of conversation.

In addition,.....the policy of judgment continued,.... with President Bush's declaration of a war on terror, the labelling of the Axis of Evil and the ultimate wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This was America's response to the bullying threat of terrorism.

Ten years ago, 90% of the people supported doing violence and vengeance as a response.

Back then, I talked with many people, and most thought that was the only choice, aside from doing nothing.

They didn't know the real way to resolving terrorism, and they didn't and don't realize the consequences that are causing so many to stumble,... to this day.

This past week, I asked a number of Osler School kids what they are taught to do when confronted by a bully.

Here is what I was told:

First ignore them. Ignore them three times. *[Ignoring is a way of taking their power away, and that may mean absorbing a few assaults].*

If that doesn't work, then ask them to stop. In other words, try communicating.

The next step, if the bullying continues, is to ask a group of friends to help confront the bully... with more talking.

[Talking / communication displays hope and invites change]

If the bully doesn't stop bullying, then report the bullying to a teacher.

I asked the kids, "When can you beat him up? At what point do you kill him?"

The strange look they gave me, was a good response.

I was curious to see what the teacher does when a bully is reported, and so I asked someone in administration.

I was informed that the staff does more talking with the bully. Occasionally, the offender is given some undesirable chores to do,... which is a very modest consequence.

I asked, "What happens next— severe punishment, suspension or what?"

I was told she didn't know.... because the problem has always been resolved by then.

Interesting, talking / working with a bully seems to work. Children know that; schools know that, so what happened for the rest of us?

Why don't our leaders know that, and why does our society support a violent response?

As usual, the Bible has some good insight, especially today's passages.

The Psalm text reminds us that God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger and full of love for us.

God does not do revenge or an eye for an eye; God doesn't punish us to match our bad behaviour.

The Psalmist emphasises that God love those who yield / who acknowledge God as God, and that God loves us as a parent loves a child.

We generally concede that God is a judge; however, the image in Psalm 103 sure doesn't sound judgmental. ???????

In a moment, we'll examine Paul's advice about judging, yet we need to understand what judgment is all about.

We can't avoid assessing or measuring or appraising others, and that's okay. Reviewing / discerning a person or a situation is how we learn.

That is not judging.

Judging is very different.

Judging / judgment is a conclusion – it is a final declaration / a verdict.

Judging ends the conversation; judging ends,... and that automatically means consequences.

Once judged – Hope is pretty much destroyed.

We accept that God judges,..... and God judges because God is timeless – beyond time. We believe that God is in the beginning and the end. Therefore, by default God judges because God endures to the end.

We don't have that capability or power.

When we judge, when we dismiss someone, when we declare someone hopeless and requiring destruction,..... then we are playing God.

When we judge we are not yielding to God and not accepting God as God, which means God is having a tough time sharing love with us.

In Romans 14, Paul states that we must not judge others. The immediate issue was over food purity and acceptability, but Paul used that example to get the point across – DON'T Judge others.

In verses 7 and 10, he notes that we are not in control and we not God, so we dare not judge.

{And, keep in mind how gracious and merciful God is, anyways.}

We could respond to this warning as a toddler would – it's just another rule to try to keep..... in order to make God happy.

Yet, that interpretation would be grossly missing the meaning.

In addition, to the warning that it is not prudent, ...actually stupid... to pretend to be God and think that we have the right to judge others, Paul adds more insight about the dangers of judging, in the following verses.

Verses 13-19 were not included in our readings, but I'll read most of it now:

Verse 13

Let's us therefore no longer pass judgment on another, but resolve instead to Never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

Judging is a stumbling block..... because it block the journey / is a barrier to communication, removes the hope for healing and peace.

Judgment is a conclusion / an ending, BUT life has not ended, so there is still hope,..... So, we really mess things up.... for everyone when we judge – terminate the relationship.

Verse 15:

“If your brother or sister is being injured by what you [do], you are no longer walking in love.”

Our actions matter.

How does Imperialism measure up to this, and what about the violent response to the events of 9/11 – the wars and deprivation that resulted because of judging????? Terrorism in any flavour is wrong!

And, what about Canadian mining and extraction companies at home and in other countries???? Are they hurting people?

If our actions are hurting others, then..... we are not walking with God.

And there is more, verse 16 states that we are to not let our good be spoken of as evil. *Good intentions do not reconcile bad actions, and...*

The end does NOT justify the means. Redemptive violence is a lie.

In addition, as Paul clarifies in verse 17, God's domain / God's way is not about rules and conclusions, but about righteousness, peace and the joy of being abiding in God's love.

And verse 19:

“Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

We are in progress / on a journey.... and in relationship with all things, therefore we dare not try to play God by forcing an ending / by putting up the stumbling blocks of judgment.

The horror that happened ten years ago today, includes the killings—and it the horror includes the intentional turning away from God.

The terrorists' assault was a stumbling block,..... and instead of removing it / instead of countering fear and terror with peace and love, more stumbling blocks were built—ugly, nasty barriers.....and all of us are tripping over them,..... and we don't seem to get it,..... but the students at Osler School understand.

Let me put it a different way.

According to official accounting, over 100,000 people died in Iraq because of the war. That is a 37% increase in the mortality rate. Other sources claim the death toll is much higher. Other sources have the number killed at ½ a million. From nearly 3,000 killed on 9/11 to over ½ a million, if Afghanistan is included. We're going in the wrong direction,.... and there is more... that is stumbling humanity.

The US government claims that both wars have cost 1.3 trillion dollars, so far. Brown University asserts that the real number is 4 trillion dollars because a lot of spending on the war is beyond the US military.

4 trillion—I can't fathom that.

So, let's round it off to a manageable one trillion dollars. :)

We can grasp a trillion dollars, can we not? ???

According to the NY Times, if the US didn't go to war, they could have paid for universal health care ... for all Americans.

Research funding for cancer, heart disease and diabetes could have been doubled.

All the children of the world who can't afford immunizations, could have been immunized..... saving millions of lives.

And, so far all that adds up to only ½ a trillion dollars.

Imagine if the other ½ a trillion dollars was spent on ending world hunger and poverty, and investing in education???

If that happened,..... would we still be so paranoid? Would we still be talking about a possible terrorist attack happening today? Would we Canadians be committed to building up our military and cutting funds to social services?

In the past ten years, as reported by CBC, we have spent 92 billion on security because of 9/11,..... and what do we have to show for it?

Currently our government and the US government are closing a security deal called “Beyond Borders”..... what freedoms and grace are we ending in this deal?

When we judge / when we take away hope..... then we stumble, and to be sure.... there is a spiritual element to all of this, too.

We have chosen not to be merciful, gracious and loving as God is.

We have chosen to not pursue peace, but instead have acted as if we are in control,... as if we are God.

We are walking away from love, and stumbling over the consequences, which include: selfishness, greed, economic instability, discord, corruption, distrust, fear, paranoia, division, lies, misinformation..... and violence,and we seem perplexed by it all.

Maybe we are NOT God.

Maybe we shouldn't jump to conclusion and take control?

Maybe it is counterproductive, even dangerous to judge **anyone**.

Maybe we better not judge that person down the street or someone arrested in the west end of Saskatoon or someone who is pregnant out of wedlock, someone who is begging for money or someone who is different,.....or someone who has hurt us,..... including a bully.

Perhaps, we don't control the end, and therefore..... maybe, just maybe there is hope.....

God is love. God is merciful and slow to anger, and God is a God of wholeness and peace,.....AND..... we are not God.

This is God's world, and we can help **clear the way** for people to experience God... by doing grace and love..... or we can put up stumbling blocks by judging and engaging in destruction.

Here's a hint for today:

I suggest going with *clearing the way*.