

September 27, 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Mark 9:38-50

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by [Karoline M. Lewis](#) in the [September 16, 2015](#) issue

We are very skilled at stumbling blocks. That's funny, because stumbling blocks are not something at which one would aspire to attain expertise. By definition, they ought to be rather unintentional: we stumble upon them, by accident. We trip over them, sometimes but not always catching ourselves before we fall. The severity of stumbling blocks is unpredictable, too. They can be a hiccup along the way, an easily recoverable falter that neither we nor others even notice. They can also be the cause for some serious tumbling, more than a mere slip-up that is easily brushed under the rug.

At this point in Mark, directly after the second Passion prediction, stumbling blocks seem a necessary point for conversation. Why? Because we are good at placing them in others' paths, and even better at setting them before ourselves. Jesus names this truth about us, and about what it means to follow him. It's a truth that has to be called out now—because come chapter 11, there will be much over which to stumble. It's time to get ready, to prepare, to anticipate that what comes next might bring some unanticipated challenges.

Of course, Jesus doesn't really articulate where and how and why we stumble. He simply tells us that we will, and that we have the potential to cause others to as well. What is so appealing about securing the fall of another? This is a question for the human condition, one that probes the truth of our human brokenness. It's a question that everyone who claims faith in Jesus needs to answer.

When we find ourselves placing stumbling blocks in the paths of others, the truth is that we do not want them to succeed, to grow in faith, to be better disciples. We

don't want them to advance, because their advancement is inevitably about our inability to do so. We don't want them to be farther along than we are.

Is this just the nature of sin, the truth of our brokenness that leads to all kinds of ways in which we stop, silence, and subjugate the other? Maybe. But we should start by being honest about the fact that we do this to ourselves, too. We regularly truncate our own potential in life, certain of our lack of abilities. Or we find security in a false sense of humility. We sabotage our own happiness, our own joy, our deserving of attention, our sense of worthiness—by way of stumbling blocks that say you are not worthy, you do not deserve it, you need to do more to earn this kind of recognition.

We put many stumbling blocks in our own paths, with no one else to blame. We come up with all sorts of impediments as to why we are inadequate in our faith, why we are rather mediocre disciples, why we should be deemed believers who do not have it all together. You don't have enough faith, and even if you do, you don't go to church often enough. You don't read your Bible on a regular basis. Your obedience to the Ten Commandments leaves much to be desired. And you don't pray enough. Not enough good works, not enough time and money given to the church.

In short, you are just not good enough. You are not worthy. Come on, we are talking about being a Christian! There are a lot of expectations in this job, and we just can't seem to live up to them.

Jesus knows this, and he says that we should stop. Just stop it. This isn't a competition. It isn't about who gets to the finish line first or who is the best disciple. It's about following. When you truly follow, your eyes aren't on yourself or the person next to you. Following takes paying attention to what is in front of you—not because you and the person next to you don't matter, but because the person you're following has a claim on how you see yourself and how you see the other. When we truly see what is in front of us—Jesus, what Jesus does, who Jesus is and isn't—then the chances for stumbling blocks diminish. We start to see that Jesus is beyond our best efforts to limit, sideline, abscond, or silence.

We will continue to try, of course. This is why Jesus has to call out our efforts to cause ourselves and others to stumble. The gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news for us, the certainty that God is present here and now—will not allow us to thwart God's insistence on being among us, rather than hidden in heaven or tamed behind a curtain. Your God is here. Nothing you do can secure a different truth.