

“Who Put These Boulders in the Road?”

June 21, 2009

1 Samuel 17:19-24, 32-33, 37-40

2 Corinthians 6:1-11

Back in Massachusetts, I knew a fellow in AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, who frequently insisted that, now that he was sober, he never hurt anyone anymore. This man – I’ll call him “Charles” – had had a long, ugly drinking history. His drinking had shattered his marriage, it had shattered his work life, and, in a drunk-driving accident, it had shattered his leg. He had hurt many, many people during the years before he put down the bottle and picked up a sense of hope and a sense of God at work in his life.

During the years I knew him, Charles seemed to become more and more convinced that his days of hurting people were over, more and more convinced that he was living each and every day without ever hurting anyone in any way. I confess: I had a hard time believing him. From a mixture of cynicism and, I think, realism, I figured that the only way anyone could completely avoid hurting other people ever again was to become a hermit ... but, even then, the people this hypothetical hermit would have to leave behind would probably be hurt by his or her absence.

My sense that it just couldn’t be true that Charles was living his life without ever hurting anyone was also fueled by the months and then years I heard him speak in AA meetings. You see, Charles had a knack for making sure that he sat at the exact place in the circle of chairs where he would almost always have a chance to speak, no matter whether the chairperson of the meeting started the discussion going clockwise or counterclockwise. And even though the meeting had a 5-minute rule to limit each person’s sharing and even though Charles almost always spoke for well *over* 5 minutes, the chairperson never asked him to stop after his 5 minutes were up. Charles frequently told the same stories about his life, shared the same quotation from Mother Teresa, and repeated the same reading from the AA book, *As Bill Sees It*.

What all this meant is that, more than once, someone who needed to speak in that meeting didn’t get a chance, because Charles talked as long and as often as he did. More than once there were other people, other perspectives, that we needed to hear but didn’t. Was that Charles’ “fault”? I don’t know. Was it his responsibility to make room for other people by keeping his remarks short? Maybe. Can I say that he “hurt” someone else by talking so long and so often, saying so much of the same thing? I really don’t know if he did, but what I do know is that I was never able to hear him say that he didn’t hurt anyone anymore without wondering and saying to myself, “Oh, friend. I’m just not so sure.”

My memories of Charles came back to me this last week, as I read and prayed with this morning’s passage from one of Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth. The memories came back as I read and reread these words from Paul: “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way.” No obstacle, ever? No stumbling block for anyone, in any way? Really? Is that humanly possible? Or, perhaps more to the point, is that possible for Paul, the Paul revealed in his letters as a thoroughly *human* human being, with his vulnerability to anger, impatience, sarcasm, and self-righteousness?

Even though it makes me skeptical of his claim about never creating obstacles, Paul's humanness is precisely what makes him so lovable, so complex, and such a valuable companion on our journeys of faith. His letters suggest that he could be unkind, at least in his words; judgmental; passionate; confusing, if not confused; and, in my view, mistaken more than once. In other words, Paul comes across as a fallible, incomplete person, just like you and me. *And ...* and, just like you and me, he comes across as someone capable of encountering and sharing his encounters with the risen Christ. Just like you and me, he comes across as someone able to encounter and *to be transformed* by the very presence of the Holy One, the Holy One who comes to tell us that nothing, *nothing*, not even betrayal, violence, or death, can extinguish the love of God for all of creation.

So when Paul's letter to the Corinthians comes along with these words – “We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way” – those of us who experience Paul as a fallible, sometimes cranky man have at least two choices. We can roll our eyes and say, in essence, “Yeah, right. In your dreams, honey.” *Or* we can remember that Paul himself confesses, in his letter to the church in Rome, “I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” In other words, our second option when encountering Paul this morning is to remember that he himself admits that he tries to do what is just, what is faithful, what is “the good,” but he isn't always able to pull it off.

This, then, is what I hear in that short section of this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, “We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way.” I hear that God has called Paul and his co-workers to clear the road for the Corinthians (and the Romans and the Ephesians ... and the Sonomans), so that they (and we) can encounter and share God's love and grace without any obstruction, without any obstacles, without any stumbling blocks. I think Paul has heard that call to keep the pathway clear, he trusts that call, and he tries to follow that call ... and then he succeeds at times and fails at times as he tries.

And, my beloved brothers and sisters, through Paul, the Spirit of the Living God is issuing the same call to us, to you and me, to this church. The Holy One calls us to help one another *and to help the world* remove any and all obstacles that keep anyone from receiving the blessings of God, the abundance of life that God in Christ offers, and the healing power of the Holy Spirit as it moves through us in love and service.

What would it look like if this congregation took on the call, not only to avoid creating any obstacles or road-blocking boulders, but to be ready and willing to help anyone who encounters a boulder on the road toward God's vision for us and for the world?

Let's start with a few simple things. How many boulders does this congregation put in the road for folks who come into this sanctuary for the first time (or second or third or fourth time)? When someone comes here, wondering what this church is like, wondering whether it will in fact offer sanctuary, wondering whether it will offer a glimpse of God's extravagant welcome, are there any obstacles that we've put in the way ... or any obstacles that we've *left* in the way? Whether we're ushers for the week or not, do we offer genuine hospitality to whoever comes through those doors, whether they are rich or poor, friendly or shy, Republican or Democrat, gay or straight or in between, young or old or in between? Or do we put some boulders on the road in here by talking

only with the people we already know or by sizing newcomers up by how they dress or speak or smile or frown?

This church is rightly proud that it doesn't create the boulders in the road that many other churches seem to celebrate – the boulders that block people who are divorced or who have doubts about God, Christ, the Bible, or church itself. This church is rightly proud that it doesn't create boulders that block people who believe that Christianity is one way, not the way, toward union with God. It is rightly proud that it doesn't create boulders blocking people who recognize that gay and lesbian people are creations of a God of diversity and surprising love. And our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is rightly proud of being a denomination that doesn't throw up road blocks for people who want to keep their intellects and their interest in science as they sit in the pews or stand in the pulpit.

But how do we as a congregation and a denomination do with people whose religious experience and faith are more emotionally and physically expressive?. Do any of us secretly appreciate the boulders that make it more difficult for folks who are perhaps more interested in the mystical, emotional experience of God than they are in an intellectual exploration of the sacred? Are we even aware that there are boulders in the road, here and in many churches, hindering a fuller expression and experience of the divine?

Or do we create obstacles in the way King Saul did with David in the ancient story of David and Goliath? Do we forge ahead, sure that we know what someone else needs, sure that we know just how we can be of help, sure that what works for us will work for another? Do we act without discovering just who that other person is or just what she or he might need? Do we place our own version of Saul's helmet, armor, and sword on someone else, creating obstacles, and not, in fact, offering anything that's actually helpful?

I'm not urging any of us to be under the illusion that it will be possible to become people who can truthfully say, "We don't ever put any obstacles in anyone's way." I don't think it's humanly possible never to create stumbling blocks that catch others or ourselves, any more than I thought or think that it's humanly possible not to hurt anyone in anyway. But I do believe that God has put those goals before us – to help clear each other's pathways toward God, to avoid adding rubble to an already bumpy road, and to keep the harm we do to the world, including ourselves, to a minimum.

So, when someone you know or someone you read or hear about encounters road blocks on the journey into God, into wholeness ... when someone runs into boulders that block the way toward joyful work and healing, loving service, be prepared to hear the question, "Who put these boulders in the road?" And be prepared to tell the truth if you helped those boulders get there or if you had the chance to move them but didn't.

And, at the same time, let us hope, pray, and work to become a community of faith that can, in truth, answer, "We don't think we put them there, but we'd sure like to help you get past them." There are plenty of obstacles between us and the fullness of God's blessing, between *all* of humanity and the fullness of God's blessing, and between all of *creation* and the fullness of God's blessing. We don't need to add any more. But whether those boulders in the road came from us or from some other source, the Spirit calls us to help one another and the world to keep going, no matter what the obstacles.

The Spirit calls us to keep moving closer to God and to God's vision of true Shalom for us all.

Thanks be to God that we've been called into this work together. Amen.

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