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Mark 9:30-37
Jeremiah 11:18-20
Psalm 54
James 3:13-4:3,7-8

September 30, 2018
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

We are going to take today carefully and thoughtfully. I feel as though this past week has given us all pause. Pause to consider what is important to us. What we believe in. What is worth standing for. I have listened to so many voices and I am sure you have as well. Voices of pain, voices of survival. Voices of anger. And voices of resolve. Voices we agree with and voices we don't.

We have watched our national narrative overtaken by testimonies and accusations, by the best of intentions as well as the worst of the motivations. We can't ignore it as a community of faith. If we did, our faith would quickly become irrelevant. So with open hearts and open minds, let's move into this difficult time together. Because if ever we have a chance to apply the Gospel, it is now.

I know each of you have your opinions regarding the Kavanaugh hearings this week. I have talked to many of you about the struggle in front of us, the growing animosity, the declining ability to work together, the polarization of our families, friends, and colleagues. And the reality is setting in that we are at a critical moral moment.

I'm not talking about the morality defined by any one political group or community. Because that kind of morality, as defined by any one group, has gotten so skewed that one commentator called it a *"tsunami of situational ethics."* It's become almost impossible to sort through.

I believe this moral moment isn't something we can push under the rug. As I watched the hearings, I kept wondering how we, as a religious community, can honestly and faithfully rise above the rhetoric. There has to be some larger lessons we can take from this wave of division we find ourselves in as a nation. But to do so is going to take some serious self-reflection and prayer about what we are called to do today...in this climate as followers of Christ. Because we do not have to be passive participants. In fact, we are called to be active examples of godliness in what often seems to be a godless world.

Harry Truman once stated that, "The country has to awaken every now and then to the fact that the people are responsible for the government they get." But, if we get caught in the sensationalism of it all, we can often lose sight of our moral compass, of what God has to say about how we are to live, how we are to act, how we are to treat others. And, so at moments like this, instead of engaging in the finger pointing and creating deeper divisions, maybe we can take a step back, look inward, and consider our own actions and how we can set a better example. We are indeed responsible not only for ourselves and for the way we show up in the world to one another.

I was thankful for this week's Gospel and Epistle. Together they provide a framework for keeping our moral compass of faith at the center of our lives. Although we live in a time where that tsunami of situational ethics often makes it hard to navigate this ever growing grey area of right and wrong, our faith stands as a light to guide us. Sometimes religious imperatives aren't fun and they don't make us the life of the party. But rules are important because without them, there is no common sense of good.

The need for rules, for religious imperatives, also recognizes an inevitable fact - that they will be broken. We need them and we will break them. But, as John Meacham points out in his book, *The Soul of America*, that is where our great leaders and great citizens have often emerged. Individuals who have made bad choices or decisions but realized how to rise above their mistakes to reach higher and strive for their better angels. They did so because they were able to admit their faults, make critical changes to their perspectives, and act upon a new moral insight guided by a desire for the common good.

So with this in mind, what do we, as individuals, learn from Mark and from James this week? We learn two important lessons. The first from Mark is to make sure that we are not creating stumbling blocks for others (that's the willingness to seek the common good) and the second from James is the importance of confessing our sins and taking responsibilities for our actions. And, folks, those are extremely hard lessons to apply. They take a heck of a lot of self-reflection and they take even more humility. And they take a desire to do what is right for others. These are the examples we are called to set.

First...stumbling blocks. Jesus is talking about our individual actions that result in harm to another person. That may be a decision we make, something we say, or something we do. It could be something we are aware of or it could be something that we are obliviously to...at least until it is pointed out. But, nonetheless, stumbling blocks are the result of our own actions. Period.

Caroline Lewis writes that noticing the stumbling blocks that we create can be very unsettling for us. Because we may not ever intentionally set out to hurt someone and it's hard to recognize and accept when we do. *"We all too quickly assume that putting a stumbling block in the way of others ends up being but a mere misstep in their lives. They will quickly, we think, get back up on their feet....And yet, if we are honest, we know that tripping over something, a little stumble, can lead to a major fall -- a fall from which it takes a very long time to recuperate, if ever."*

That's the power of stumbling blocks. Jesus asks us to notice. And we need to notice now more than ever. What stumbling blocks have you created?

Second, James reminds us to confess our sins to one another, to pray for one another so that we may be healed together. In other words, take responsibility for your actions. Don't point fingers, don't place blame, don't ignore the effects of the stumbling blocks. Confess. We have

all been there and we will be there again. And so when we say the confession of sin this morning, really take in those words. Where do you need to admit a wrong and make a change?

In a world where confession is seen as a weakness, God sees it as a strength. Not something to be ashamed of but something to be thankful for. Because it is on our continual willingness to seek God's moral compass that we draw closer to God and to one another.

Lucy Wysong, one of our congregants, gave me the perfect image for how we can think about God's moral compass. She thinks of the compass not as a circle but as a triangle with a single point of pure light at the top. That light is, of course, God.

As the triangle moves from that point of pure light, it grows increasingly darker as the base gets increasingly larger. And so as we move down the triangle farther away from God, the world and humankind get darker – we don't have as much light to guide us. We begin to notice that there is always something darker below us. As a result, we begin to justify our "bad behavior" as though to say there is always someone who is worse than we are. We may have lied. But at least we didn't lie and steal like that other guy. Then it gets a little darker. We may have lied and stolen, but we didn't lie and steal and kill. There is always something or someone doing something worse that we are. And so that makes us feel less bad. Our moral compass gets shady and we get used to this increasing darkness. It's a slippery and easy descent. The further we get away from the brilliant light, the more our eyes adjust and we don't even see how dark it may actually be.

That darkness is the stumbling block, the choices we make, the patterns we create. Our actions that have consequences not just for ourselves but for others in our lives as well. And one stumbling block often leads to another and another as we move more into the darkness of our choices. But confession is what calls us back to the light. And if we are all looking towards the light, working to make better choices, correcting our wrongs and acknowledging our mistakes, then together we find ourselves in the brightness of God's love once again. And we are able to move back up that triangle, closer to God and to one another.

That's the good news that we have to cling to in our troubled world. When things seem so out of sorts, when stumbling blocks become a mountain of stones, we have a unique ability to show others that we can indeed rise out of the darkness. But it must start with you and me, in our words, in our actions, in our faith.

I'm going to end this morning with the words Lucy would tell her boys every day before they left for school.

"Stay in the light."

Thanks be to God. Amen.