

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ..."

Since I have never been an advocate for placing a great millstone around another's neck to make sure they sink before casting them into the sea and since I have never promoted cutting off a hand, foot or tearing out an eye for any reason, moral, theological or otherwise I paused to think how I might address this gospel lesson in a sermon. I just don't want to ignore or discount these words of Jesus so I turned to *The New Interpreter's Bible* to see if those scholars' insights that I hold in high regard might shed some light on these verses. To my relief they provide some helpful insight.

Reflection #1 from the New Interpreter's Bible regarding these verses states: "This collection of saying is very difficult for Christians to hear. The amputation metaphors, with their references to the fires of hell, are inevitably perceived in legalistic terms as words of damnation, not grace. Yet we should be able to recognize the metaphoric use of language in these sayings, which were part of familiar proverbs in Jesus' day. His audience would have had no difficulty recognizing the fact that Jesus was speaking metaphorically and was not literally suggesting that we remove an offending body part."

I was relieved to read that the consensus of biblical scholars does not take these verses in our gospel lesson in a literal fashion but understand them to be metaphors that urge each of us to seriously consider any *stumbling blocks* we may place in the lives of others or fall over ourselves.

Mayor Jean Stothert and the City Council examined the living conditions at Yale Park located at 34th and Lake Streets on September 21st and determined the code violations in the 100 apartments in that complex were stumbling blocks for the 500 refugee residents. The residents were removed immediately to temporarily live at Adams Park or Columbus Park Community Centers until alternate living locations might be found. The hand, foot, and eye of the owner of the Yale Park apartments were not cut off or plucked out but his source of income was taken away as those residents departed. The owner was given a mandate to repair all violation codes before he can rent apartments in the future.

The apartment owner of Yale Park who placed a large *stumbling block* for healthy living has been starkly contrasted by the generous support of many in the community who have donated time, food, clothing, furniture and money to help those families get a new start. The Benson Area Task Force (B.A.R.T.) is sponsoring one of the families and will help with their relocation. If you would like to assist in some fashion please contact Marjorie Shreve, the Chair of B.A.R.T. for further information. Another step each of us can take is to contact the Mayor and our City Council member asking them to find a solution like a Rental Property Registration Ordinance that could work in Omaha that proactively prevents apartments from falling into disrepair.

Helping others moves us from the negative side of the gospel equation of stumbling blocks to the positive side of being stepping stones.

This past week the Omaha World Herald recognized some folk who are *stepping stones* in rural Nebraska. They are Scott Gonnerman and his wife, Barb, saluted for their work in promoting soil health by awarding them the 2018 Production Agriculture Master Conservationist Award.

Farmers have stumbled with soil erosion and pest control over the decades and that was the case for Scott Gonnerman, a fourth-generation Nebraska farmer near York, when he decided about ten years ago to start new practices so he and other farmers might encounter fewer stumbling blocks. He now follows a rule as he goes through his annual planting and harvesting routines: "Every time a combine leaves the field, a planting drill follows."

Cover crops such as rye grass protect and enrich the soil, he says: "We always plant something after the combine leaves just so we have a living root out there to pump carbon into the soil and feed the living biology." In addition to enriched soil the cover crops have disrupted the insect cycles enough that Gonnerman doesn't need to use insecticides, allowing the beneficial insects to control invasive pests. Gonnerman notes: "My farm has to have insect paths and bad fungi, because that's what the beneficial insects survive on. If we create the right habitat, then when all the insects and pest come, they will balance themselves out." Gonnerman noted: "Since we started educating ourselves on how soils function our driving force for a majority of our farm operation is if it's going to be healthy for the soil or not." With that goal in mind Gonnerman started to follow the no-till method—farming that doesn't disturb the soil through tilling and therefore limits topsoil erosion in the process. After ten years of innovative practices the Gonnermans' farm has become a teaching center as they host 'field days' each year as they invite other farmers to listen to speakers from all over the world who provide demonstrations and lectures about soil health.

The Gonnermans' are certainly *stepping stones* who have addressed stumbling blocks in the farming community. Let me share another *stepping stone* story a little closer to home, the Raptor Recovery program at Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue. In this case the *stepping stone* is for wildlife.

Did you see that Raptor Recovery program released three eagles and two hawks in front of hundreds of people at Neale Woods Nature Center last weekend? One of the eagles released was found by Brandy Iwanski back in January. She found the female eight pound bald eagle hopping around near Comstock, Nebraska. It was unable to fly after a gunshot wound to its wing. Nine months later the recovered eagle is enjoying life in the wild. *Brandy who found the eagle was a stepping stone*. She said at the release: "Don't be afraid to help a raptor. Just because they have a beak and claws...don't leave them out there to die. There's no reason for it."

The Raptor Recovery team at Fontenelle Forest works to heal eagles, hawks, owls, falcons, and turkey vultures. They have releases periodically throughout the year. The program has about 130 volunteer transporters and five full-time staff members. During the release last weekend, each bird was paraded through the crowd before being released, giving attendees an opportunity to see them up close. The Director of the program said: "Once you look in the eagle's eyes, and you can see the eagle looking at the outdoors, that's a really good feeling." *The Raptor Recovery folk are stepping stones*.

Our gospel lesson implores us with strong metaphorical language to see if we are being *stumbling blocks* to others or if we continue to walk paths filled with *stumbling blocks*. If so, we are urged to remove the *stumbling blocks* at all costs. Yet, in love, we know that is not enough. Christ invites us to lay out *stepping stones* for ourselves and others along the way. In fact, we will find that as we provide *stepping stones* we do not have time or even inclination be mess with *stumbling blocks*.

Please remember the story of the *stumbling block of a man* found in Acts 9 who became a *stepping stone for goodness*.

“Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

That is being a stumbling block if there ever was to be a stumbling block.

³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

Here Ananias is being requested to be a *stepping stone*.

¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;

Christ is letting Ananias know that Christ is in the business of *transforming stumbling blocking into stepping stones*.

¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” ²¹ All who heard him were amazed ²² Saul became increasingly more powerful ... by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.”

Saul who we know as the Apostle Paul became a *stepping stone*.

We too are invited to examine our lives and move away from being *stumbling blocks* as we respond to the call of being *stepping stones*.