

Sermon Text for October 15, 2017

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Psalm 118:19-25, Romans 9:30-33

“Stumbling into Christ”

The stories coming out of California are pretty horrific. The image of a couple in a swimming pool just coming up periodically for gasps of air and at the end the wife dying in the arms of her husband. The stories coming out of Puerto Rico are equally shocking with American citizens forced to drink from impure water sources simply because the relief is nowhere to be found. From Houston we read of residents still not able to live in their homes because they have been deemed unsafe. Families all around our nation interrupted and torn apart by a single gunman in Las Vegas. It seems like we are stumbling a bit in our civil society as we seem unable to say anything to each other without it being interpreted as a stand on one side or another.

But here we find ourselves in what I hope you all consider a safe haven. A place where we can gather safely without the sense of fear and dichotomous relationships which mark so many of our relationships and our gathering places. The church, and specifically this church. As a place where we can stumble into after a stressful week, seems just about right. As your pastor I will do everything I can do ensure that we pursue the kingdom of God together with one common purpose and that we are not distracted by issues or events that others seem to want harp on over and over again.

This week Paul repeats the word “strive” over and over again in relationship to our faith in Christ. In this context he talks about those who try so hard for a relationship with Christ but stumble, trip, and fall just short, before they reach the goal line, before they get the prize. What they actually stumble over is the cornerstone, the rock upon which the church is built, Jesus Christ himself. Let’s look at this passage in Romans.

READ

Many of you in this church are very familiar with Rick Warren’s book called a Purpose Driven Life. The premise of the book is that so many people go through life just kind of drifting from one job, one town, one event, one family to another without a specific clear goal in mind that directs them and guides them on. We are stumbling through life without truly knowing what is guiding us and directing us as we get older in

life and as our life situations change. The premise is that those who succeed, whether in vision, or in relationships, or dare I say even in life, see a vision for what they want and pursue it.

The author of the book is a pastor, Rick Warren and he is the pastor at Saddleback Church, and he also wrote the book *A purpose driven church*. He asks the question, what is your purpose, what are you striving for and after. What is it that prevents you from obtaining that goal and what are some ways that you can overcome that barrier? Paul uses this term strive but in a very different way. In the Greek the term strive means literally to pursue, to go after, but with the understanding that what you are pursuing is just out of reach. It is almost like in a dream as you are running to get to a certain destination and no matter how hard you try, you feel like you are in quicksand, you just can't reach that goal.

So what are we striving after, and that Greek understanding of never really being able to reach the prize should give us pause, because we have seen over history that there are those who have striven for completely the wrong reason, they have been sincere, but they have been wrong. Hitler believed in his cause, he had a goal to exterminate an entire race, and he almost did it. We can agree he strove after a tragic, hideous, wrong goal, but he was sincere. Idi Amin, the same, Pol Pot in Cambodia and the killing fields, people whose goal it is to create a single religion in islam or a single race in the white supremacists. These are all purpose driven people, all sincere, and we can safely say with hopefully no argument and debate that they are sincerely wrong.

It is not enough to strive and have a purpose driven life, the purpose which drives your life, that which you strive after must be, as Paul tell us, the cornerstone. It must be Jesus Christ. In the church that we served in Florida there was a very well known muslim woman in the community whom we invited to speak. Her husband was a local doctor whom everyone loved. It was not long after 9-11 so you can imagine the skepticism that many approached that evening. The hall was packed.

She shared with us how her life is one of striving after righteousness and the results are not death and destruction but rather peace and reconciliation to those around her. Mrs. Ahmad clearly presented the religion of Islam as one of peace based upon the law where what we do contributes to whether God looks in favor upon us or not. Our

actions will be judged and every little thing we do will be recorded and brought up on judgment day. Our righteousness is based upon what we do.

Now for many of us that may sound right and not very different from what we as Christians believe. But as wonderful as it is to see that we have some potential points of near contact, we need to recognize that we are still in matters of faith a world apart. This is exactly what Paul is talking about here. Gentiles, or the people who did not strive for righteousness have attained it, but the Israelites who strove for it after the law, after their own actions, according to what they did, did not succeed in attaining it. Why did the Israelites fail to attain it according to Paul? Why did they fail to achieve righteousness, and this is the crux here today, this is the dividing wall that we find even though there are many points of near contact.

The reason that they failed is that we are not partners with God in our salvation. We cannot by our actions add or subtract a single thing from our salvation. Why? Because Daddy said so through Paul. We do not rely upon any type of legalistic approach to God, but rather upon faith. The Israelites were so religious that they did not want to settle for something God could give them freely and without a cost. I must be able to do something so I've contributed in some way to my salvation, to my own righteousness before God. But we are not partners, we are the clay, shaped, molded, formed, set to work for God.

Remember what Micah states. What does the Lord require? Does the Lord require sacrifice, does the Lord require that you follow certain laws, no, just love me and love my people, all of my people. You know this righteousness through works is not only seen in Judaism as we see in Paul, or in Islam, but it is especially seen within a Christian culture in which we may find ourselves. It is tough to live as a grace filled, righteousness without works Christian, or a reformed Christian whose salvation is not dependent upon anything except what Christ has done for us. Let me explain. You have heard it said that you can only be a Christian if you don't drink, smoke, don't commit adultery, don't curse, don't play golf, tithe, but I say that Christ is the way to life, the only way, it is not through being good and following these rules. Paul says we did not even strive because it is out of our reach.

I know that within this church we have gathered you from all different denominations. From Catholic to Pentecostal holiness and everything in between. And I know that one of the aspects of our Christian faith that has appealed to you the most is this fact that we believe that we are righteous not because of our effort, but because of the effort that Jesus Christ made upon the cross for us. Do not let people put your salvation in question because you don't go to church on Sunday or because every Sunday we don't walk down the aisle singing Just as I am.

Paul tells us that they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. This concept is so hard to accept if we have lived our lives looking over our shoulder and watching our eternal scorecard. Christ has wiped the slate clean, and has thrown the chalk away, believe it.

This is why Paul states that Jesus is a stumbling stone. He calls him not only the stumbling stone but also the cornerstone. In Matthew 21:42-46 Jesus himself explains these verses by saying: The Pharisees did not like that because they were doing everything according to the law, but nothing according to faith. Jesus was the stone that was rejected, thrown aside for laws because we have some participation in the laws and we can measure how we are doing. But again Jesus in the Gospel tells Peter and the rest of us in Matthew 16:15-18. Upon this rock, this cornerstone of which we shall never be ashamed is built our faith, is found our righteousness, not upon any other doctrine or action.

Righteousness, our Christian life is not the kind of life we succeed in living, but rather the status that God gives us because of who God is. A purpose driven life must be one whose purpose is beginning and ending Jesus Christ. Jesus as the one upon whom we stumble over and over and over again so that we don't run straight into any attempt to try to live our lives on our own.

Amen.