

September 27, 2009

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Stepping Stones or Stumbling Blocks

James 1:2-12

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Life is a journey. The message for the children is for us as well. Sometimes we make the whole process of being a Christian way more difficult than it really is. The simple words of "Jesus Loves Me" are just as meaningful to adults as they are to the children, or they should be!

My sermon today is titled "Stepping Stones or Stumbling Blocks". We all have them, and so much of what we do with them is just in the perspective we have of the event or events that we encounter as we walk this journey of life.

Many of you have heard my story, but I wish to make some points today using some of it once again. I was not raised in a home that our family went to church, and I really am not sure how or why I initially found my way there, probably somewhere around the third grade.

I was physically, mentally, verbally, and emotionally abused by my Mother. I never remember ever getting along with her in my early childhood. It was a constant battle. I spent most of my days in my room just to stay away from her. Maybe when I found out about being in the kid's choir, and attending Sunday school, and I knew it meant being away from home, I was drawn there. That wasn't what kept me there, though. I found love at church, from my Sunday school teachers, choir directors, eventually my youth leaders, and my Pastor. Then I found out that I was loved for who I was, and who I am, by Jesus. When I was in High School, I was drawn to ministry.

I hated the way I was treated, and I knew from a very early age, way before having children, that my kids were never going to be treated the way I was, and that no one deserved that kind of treatment. I am not sure that I even realized that I was being abused, it was just the way it was, and had always been.

Now this experience could have been a serious stumbling block in my life journey, but God had a plan. You see, He brought this amazing woman into my life at the age of 15, who was in every sense of the word, my Mom. What could have been my first huge stumbling block became an awesome stepping stone into a world of love, acceptance, and a faith that was unshakable. My future Mother in law, yes, I married her son, loved me unconditionally. We became best friends, but mostly she taught me how to be a woman of faith. She didn't preach it, she lived it! She was an awesome example for me.

A few years later when my husband and her son, died tragically in an accident, she held my hand through her own grief, and she helped me through mine. She had lost two husbands at early ages, and she had six children. She understood the road I was

traveling, and when I told her I wished I had died with him, she gently said, you have five children that need you. That was my reality check, and then I knew I had work to do to be the best Mom I could be, and stop with my pity party.....they were hurting too.

These are two major events in my life, and both of them have been instrumental in making me the person I am today.....good and bad. I do not wish the death of a spouse on anyone, but that event took my life on a whole new path.....one I would probably have never traveled.

That particular stumbling block became something that started a whole new chapter in my life. It didn't seem like a stepping stone to me at the time, but I can see now that it was. I couldn't find a support group for grief, and I wondered how many other people were out there feeling the same way as I was. I talked to some key people to get ideas, and I began running ads in the local paper to see if there was interest in a grief support group. To my amazement I started receiving phone calls and letters right away. I didn't feel I was equipped to lead such a group, but I was given encouragement by a very special friend, who was also the funeral director. He said I should do it. Thus, the first grief support group in Clinton County began with the backing of the ministerial assoc., hospice, and my friend the funeral director. That was 28 years ago.

During these 28 years, there have been lots of stumbling blocks and some stepping stones as well. I have lost several family members and friends, I have remarried, I have moved two or three times, and praise the Lord, my walk with Him has grown in leaps and bounds in spite if many of the things that have happened.

Now I am going to fast forward in my life to two or three years ago. The stumbling blocks were coming fast and furious. Let me explain.

Almost three years ago, Doug went back to work after the Christmas holiday on January 2nd to learn he no longer had a job. That was the beginning of many new adventures in both of our lives. He made new resumes, he applied for countless jobs, but at 60-something, people were not hiring.....of course they can't say it's because of your age, but he knew it was. It was very discouraging for him, and put great financial stress on everything.

It was month after month of robbing Peter to pay Paul, until Peter didn't have anything left to rob from. So, our pickup was repossessed. Then in April of 2008 Doug had a stroke. By then it looked as though we were going to lose our home too. We prayed for God to show us where He wanted us, and what He wanted us to do. I was beggingplease don't whisper, God; a two by four would be good, that will make the message loud and clear.

We had a home at Higgins Lake, but we had moved because of a job. I had maintained my relationship here at HLUMC because this was my church family. I drove back and forth to meetings, and church, but our home needed some work, and where we lived didn't. If we could sell our home at Higgins Lake, we could maintain where we

lived. I listed it for sale, and I even hired an auctioneer to do a real estate auction. I spent \$1000 on advertising, and the day of the sale.....no one showed up. Okay God, now what?

We were getting no clear answer, and we were running out of time. The mortgage company was not helping, and foreclosure was imminent. Papers were tacked onto our home, court dates were set, bill collectors were calling from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., Doug was still recuperating from his stroke, I was exhausted, and crying out for an answer.....Help me God, I can't do this without you, and I don't see an answer!

July 7 was our final date in our home. We went to court, and they granted a 10 day extension if we would give up our right to see the judge. We did, and two moving trucks, two trucks and trailers later, we were on our way to Higgins Lake. July 17th 2008 we were moving to our home. When everything got unloaded we had two storage sheds full, and the house was so full that two people couldn't be in any one room at the same time. My clothes were lost somewhere in all the chaos, and I sat down on the steps looked around and cried. What was on the first level needed to be on the second level, what was on the second level needed to be on the first level, and I couldn't move anything myself. The prayer chain went out, and within a very short time our prayer was heard by a couple that had gotten up that morning, prayed together for God to show them if anyone needed their help today! A wonderful home was offered to us, so that we could work on ours during the day, and leave it and go somewhere that wasn't total chaos at night. This was a huge blessing for us.

The stumbling blocks kept coming, as we were without water for three and a half months. We had a 400 gallon plastic tank on a trailer in front of our house. The roof leaked. We had a frozen pipe which caused a flood in our bathroom, the transmission went out of our truck, the water heater quit working and I was saying GOD.....we were supposed to come here for this? Help me!! On Feb. 13th a floor collapsed, and that seemed like the final straw for me. For six weeks we lived at a hotel while repairs were being made.....and for me that was the turning point. Many thousands of dollars later, we had a new kitchen floor and a brand new bathroom.....things were looking better.....now the roof. What we thought was a huge thing turned out to be some snow damage, easily fixed, and the cost would be less than half of what we had expected, so we decided to fix some other things with the "extra" money.

Okay, now here is where I tell you that we don't always see that these stumbling blocks really are stepping stones until we can look back on them.

The first stepping stone was that we had a home to go to. Many who have lost their jobs and homes don't have that. We had a roof over our head, albeit a leaky one, it was a roof.

The water tank in the front yard gave us a whole new view of not wasting water. We saved dish water to flush the toilet. We turned the water off when brushing our teeth.

It made me really think about how much water we waste. I hated seeing water go down the drain. It was like gold when you had to call someone once a week to come and fill your tank. Showers were much quicker.

What seemed like an impossible task getting things organized and put away, and boxes unpacked, gave way to donating unused items to Habitat, and actually throwing away the junk. I finally sat one day looking at all there was still to do, and realized that looking at it all it was impossible, but if I would just take a room at a time, or even a box at a time, it would get done. Now, I wanted it all done now.....but it got done.....it just took a little longer.

God knew what He was doing.....He always does. There were some more lessons to learn.....and a new perspective to gain on what is really important and what isn't.

Our scripture this morning said: Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. Right now I think I am ready for anything!

Perspective is everything and you can see biblical examples of how perspective influenced the failures of men and women. For example, Job, in his major, major down time.....the loss of his family, the loss of fortune.....the man held steady. His perspective of problems and failure were entirely different from his friends, who told Job to curse God and die because it was a terrible thing that had happened to him. Hannah and Sarah both wanted children. Hannah was willing to wait on the Lord until she had her child. Sarah wasn't willing to wait on the Lord, brought Hagar into the picture, and caused all kinds of problems because of it. Again, the perspective and the response to trials is key.

It isn't always events. Sometimes, it is people that are stumbling blocks in our Christian walk. People hurt us, and we question ourselves, and wonder if this pain is worth all the effort. I have found though, that through every difficult time, God sends someone into my life that helps me gain a new perspective and the stumbling block then becomes a stepping stone to another chapter that God has orchestrated. I have a very difficult time with change, but usually when I give into the change it was far better than I could have imagined it being.

We all have a story to tell. We all have a life journey, and I speak of mine because I lived it. Many of you have had far more difficult journeys than mine. I want you to see that we all have these trials of various kinds, and they may be a stepping stone or they may be a stumbling block in your Christian walk. And like I said before, sometimes what seems like a stumbling block now, you may see as a stepping stone later when you can look back at it.

Let me share a short story about perspective.....I think this is a great story. I

am going to shorten it a bit, but here is what it is about. An old man made his way to a stack of boxes that sat near one of the little half windows in his attic. He was looking for a particular photo of his beloved wife who had passed away. Setting aside one of the dusty albums, he pulled from the box what appeared to be a journal from his grown son's childhood. He hadn't recalled ever having seen it before, or that his son ever kept a journal. He wondered why his wife had saved all this junk. He began reading the yellowed pages. It was the voice of the little boy who had grown up far too fast in this very house. It took him back to a time he had forgotten. He was then reminded he too had kept a journal. He opened a glass cabinet door, reached in and pulled out an old business journal. His was leather bound and engraved neatly with his name in gold, while his son's was tattered and the name Jimmy had been nearly scuffed off of its surface. As he opened his journal the old man's eyes fell upon an inscription that stood out because it was so brief in comparison to other days. In his own neat handwriting were these words: "Wasted the whole day fishing with Jimmy. Didn't catch a thing." Then he took Jimmy's journal and found the boy's entry for the same day, June 4. Large scrawling letters, pressed deeply into the paper read: "Went fishing with my Dad. Best day of my life." It is all in the perspective.

If we just see each trial as a stumbling block then we continue to carry all the baggage until the baggage gets so heavy we can't carry it anymore. Why do we wait until the load is so heavy we can't carry it? Why is God always the last place to go? If we would go to Him first, the load doesn't have to get so heavy.

Maybe today is the day to get rid of the baggage.....lay it at the foot of the cross.....let Jesus make your burdens light. Maybe today we need to be the little child that sang, "Jesus Loves Me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, they are weak but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so." Maybe we need to remember wherever we go, whatever our circumstances, Jesus is right here in our heart. Yes, Jesus does love me, and He loves each of you. When I didn't know what to pray for anymore, I just said God I can't do this without your help. This is more than I can bear on my own. That's what He had been waiting for!

Stepping Stone? or Stumbling Block? It's all in our perspective!

AMEN!