

Growing in faith can be difficult at times!

For John things seem to be quite clear: Jesus told them to cast out demons, heal the sick and talk about Jesus. While they were busy doing just that they met someone else who was also casting out demons and talking about Jesus. But that someone else just didn't want to follow the disciples, that someone else didn't want to conform with the disciples.

This all sound to me like an early church dispute, the kind church history is so full of. You can almost see the two sides trying to convince each other that they got it right and the other just has it wrong. Church history is full of those disputes and often they ended rather badly; not seldom in death and destruction of the losing party.

Jesus answer here is quite clear:

If any of you – and he is talking here to the disciples – 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.

The little ones here are all the people new to and in faith ... we who grow in faith.

Jesus is very harsh here with the disciples.

Do not hinder faith growing in people is the message! Whoever is not against us is for us. The disciples had it the other way around: They were thinking; that person is not following us, not doing exactly what we are doing... so that person must be wrong, must be against us.

This type of thinking, the thinking of exclusion is still alive and well, sad to say.

This thinking condemns others to be evil the moment they have a different opinion.

Happened to the women a few decades ago wanting to become priests, happens still to gays and lesbianshappens more than we think!

Jesus says clearly: Wrong thinking! You don't kick people out because they have problems saying the nicean creed or can not define the Holy Spirit or eat strange food, or vote for another party.

Jesus thinks inclusive, Jesus wants all people to grow in faith and at the end of today's reading he says how to do that: "Have salt in yourself and be at peace with one another.

The salt here is a mix between faith and Holy Spirit; I' come back to that in a moment.

Lets first have a look at the stumbling blocks.

In this teaching of Jesus, stumbling can come from Hands, eyes and feet. And what Jesus says here sound crazy when we take the words literally.

If your foot makes you stumble, cut it off. Taking this literally would make us all one eyed, with one foot and one hand. Sad to say, it was all too often taken far too literal in the last 2000 years.

Jesus is still talking to the disciples, the leaders; and about stumbling blocks for other people and their growing in faith.

There are really no requirements for faith; and we should not start to create them!

So what are the stumbling blocks Jesus speaks about so harshly????

So what was it in the disciples that they wanted to stop the other person casting out demons.

What is it in us that puts stumbling blocks in our path and in other peoples path???

Let me name a few here:

- telling people to stop to do good deeds because they don't conform - that is what the disciples did.
- Telling people that they have to believe in the nicean creed before they can attend church.
- Telling people: for you its too late; or you are too bad!
- Or; listing requirements for participation

The list can go on and onincluding all exclusions!

There are no requirements for faith, for starting to believe, for wanting to believe, for wanting to grow in faith.

One of the largest stumbling blocks we usually put in the way of others and ourselves in this day and age is FEAR in all its varieties!

In one of Johns letters it reads: IN LOVE there is no fear! Growing in faith or growing in Love means getting rid of the fear, sometimes like cutting it off. Addiction problems can tell many stories about this cutting off, about the often soo desperate struggle.

Lets look at all the choices we made in our lives out of fear and not out of Love; and how often have those choices turned out to be stumbling blocks for ourselves or others.

I remember many years ago – first college semester - being asked about my faith by a bunch of atheists; I didn't want to answer truthfully because I was rather afraid of being ridiculed. So I gave a rather safe theological answer, that had not so much to do with faith at all. I wonder sometimes if my answer turned out to be a stumbling block.

Any time our talk and deeds come out of fear we are a stumbling block.

Any time our talk and deeds come from Love we are salt and a light to others.

Sometimes there are old hurts and pains in us, which don't allow us to act with love because they still hurt, they are still painful, and we still suffer from them.

All those unhealed things in us are stumbling blocks, mostly for us but also for others.

Getting healed ourselves means to become salty, knowing where our stumbling blocks are and allowing God to heal them enables us to treat each other more inclusively, with more charity, with more compassion, with more love.

James in the first line of the lesson gives a short solution: Are any among you suffering? They should pray!

There are really no requirements for faith; and we should not start to create them!

Growing in faith can be painful when God confronts us with our stumbling blocks!

The purpose of that is that we grow in faith and Love, being healed from fear, pain and hurt; to have salt and to be at peace with one another!