

## SERMON: **Stumbling Blocks and Millstones**

September 13, 2009

Based on Mark 9: 36-37, 42

Rev. Ken Heintzelman

It is good for us to be together on this Kick Off Sunday and it is good for us to be back in our sanctuary. Last year we came together under the banner of Remember, Restore and Renew. It was our first year together and I wanted to listen to you and reassure you that I heard you and that I desired to know you; not change you. It was a year of trust building. I think it went well and I hope you do as well.

This year I want to focus on deepening our relationships and deepening our spirituality. The concept I am using to help me to stay focused on deepening relationships and spirituality is balance. I invite you to think along this line also.

What is balance? From the Latin "*bilancia*" meaning two dishes. We use the word to convey a lot of different nuanced meanings such as balance the checkbook, emotionally and mentally balanced, important to eat a balanced meal, do not upset the balance of nature, walk the balance beam, a balance between work and family, balance scales, a situation may be hanging in the balance, a balance between bass and treble, and people can balance each other out.

During our confirmation retreat we asked the confirmands to make two pie charts about their lives. One chart was to reveal how they actually spend their time and the other chart was to reflect how they wanted to spend their time. Some of the charts were very similar and some showed a great disparity between the two. One of the comments I overheard was; "I just don't have enough time to do everything I want to do!" Our confirmands are only 12-14 years old and already they have a sense that their lives are out of balance. To what extent are they growing up to be just like us?

I stand before you as a hypocrite. I strive to reach balance. I want balance. I play a game with myself believing that as soon as I get this project done or that team in place or 6 months worth of planning ahead accomplished, then I can back off of work a little bit and get some balance and sanity in my life. I think that but I know deep down that I cannot wait for balance to come to me. If I am to have some balance in my life then I must take responsibility and use the life coping tools I have and make it happen. This is very much related to the Ethic of Stewardship and my decision to live within the ethic of "caring for". I recognize that I am letting my life be determined by the Ethic of Dominance which orders our current society. The Ethic of Dominance which insists in shaping our relationships in terms of dominance and submission is supported by such beliefs as "If I don't do it then it won't get done" and "The person who dies with the most toys, wins!" Even if we do not say these things or we say them half heartedly we still order our lives in such a way as to put them out of balance so that we can achieve society's definition of success as prosperity. To shape our lives in accordance to stewardship rather than dominance is to move in the direction of balance for ourselves, our families, our community and our world. Of course, it is easier said than done, and most of us can probably relate.

I want us to visit the spirituality of balance off and on for the next year but for today I want to share a few thoughts about balance within our congregation. As we begin the new program year it is important for us to have our eyes wide open about our balance challenges. Our "Balance Challenges" are cultural, financial, organizational, and theological.

I believe that as the Church we are called to be counter-cultural to the dominant and dominance culture of the world. If the world is caught up in the rush and hurry of production for the sake of production, then to be counter-culturally we are called to slow down and be in caring community and covenant with one another. However, I am observing that we are a reflection and extension of the dominant culture. Our congregation adds to the busyness and the hectic pace of our lives. I am grateful for all the talent, time, energy that pours into the work of our congregation. I am also aware of the irony that as a place of refuge and people of peace we are sometimes a part of the problem rather than part of the solution. I take a risk on offering this insight. It is a tough truth that can potentially cut against us and our mission. I take the risk because I want to invite all of us to be part of an ongoing conversation that may lead to slowing down, establishing different priorities, and healing for our families and our congregation. Who will lead and who will listen to this important conversation?

The second "Balance Challenge" is financial. The good news is our expenses are \$65,000 less this year than last year and most of this comes from cuts in salaries and positions since our programming is already cut to the bare minimum. The challenging news is we are still operating with a slight deficit and therefore, we are not balanced on our ledger sheets. It is important for us to take responsibility for our fellowship and our ministries as we do our best to maintain the proper balance between the study and proclamation of the Word About Life and the deeds which make life worth living. To those who have given all they can and have given sacrificially we say thank you. To those who give and can give more, please do and thank you. To those who give nothing, please give something and thank you.

The third "Balance Challenge" is organizational. We are trying a new thing this next year. We are experimenting with reducing the size of the Church Board and at the same time creating a new entity called the All Team Council. The outcome we are striving for is two-fold. First, we hope the Church Board can focus on 3-4 priorities during the year without getting lost in all the details of the work of the Ministry Teams. Second, we hope to empower the Teams and Relational Groups to better coordinate, collaborate, and communicate among themselves and the congregation with out the distraction of the governing Board's agenda. We are seeking to establish a balance between the strategic thinking needed to guide the congregation and the tactical implementation needed to revitalize the congregation.

The fourth and final "Balance Challenge" is the most demanding and illusive of all of them. To help us get our heads wrapped around this challenge I want to give you a metaphorical image. The prophet Hosea spoke in the Hebrew scripture that Israel was like a cake unturned. If you ever fix pancakes you will get this image. Pour the batter on the hot griddle and let it cook on one side. What are you supposed to do with the cake after it cooks on the one side? You are supposed to turn it over and let it cook on the other side so that it is cooked evenly. If you do not turn the cake then it burns on one side and is raw on the other. It is not good for eating and should get thrown away. Israel was a nation that was out of balance. The religious and political leaders were observing all the religious rituals but they were cheating the poor out of everything they could and there was no recourse for justice. There was obedience to ritual but no mercy. There was religious observance and lip service but there was no justice. Israel was like a cake unturned and good for nothing but the trash heap.

At Shadow Rock United Church of Christ we also have a challenge for balance. Our Word About Life today encourages a balance between faith and works. It says that faith without works is dead. We understand this and we support this by saying it is essential to not just talk the talk but you must also walk the walk. Faith without works is dead. To not have a balance between faith and works would be like the cake unturned.

Our covenant says,

Our life together involves us individually and corporately in study and worship, always maintaining a proper balance between proclamation of the Word about life with the deeds which make life good.

Again, we are encouraged to maintain a proper balance between word and deed. We are to not just walk the walk but we are to talk the talk. We strive to be that sensitive and responsive part of human society that perceives and responds to god's newest thrust in the midst of history. We strive to balance our study and proclamation with concrete deeds that make life worth living.

Part of what this means is that we cannot study, pray, or proclaim enough nor can we **do** enough for the people who suffer and the causes of peace and justice.

I want to add another dimension to this balancing act.

We are pretty good about the "head" part of faith.

We are pretty good at the "hands" part of faith.

What I hear from people is a desire for us to get better at the "heart" part of faith. There is a spiritual hunger in people to go deeper than hands and head. People are hungry for something that engages their whole being and this means going to the heart of reality and to the essence of the meaning of life and history. There is an imbalance in the spiritual diet of humanity and it is a challenge for us here at Shadow Rock.

I remember playing a game as a child called "Tip It". The game consisted of a little figure of a man who was upside down and he would balance on his nose. The figure would balance at the top of a long vertical pole. The pole was supported by a platform with three arms sticking out of the platform. On each of the three arms were rings of different colors and the weight of the rings would keep the platform, the long vertical pole and the little man all in balance with each other. We would take turns spinning the color wheel which told us which color ring we had to take off the platform arms. You would keep taking rings off until finally the whole game became so unstable, so unbalanced, that all of it would crash to the table.



So, it is with Shadow Rock. Our mission is in a delicate balance which is supported by the three arms of head, hands and heart of faith. If we pile all of our people, time, energy, and resources into one over the other than we risk losing our mission. If we say that the way of the head, or the heart, or the hands is the Shadow Rock Way at the exclusion of the others then we are practicing our own kind of exclusivity. Instead let this be a year of getting to know people whose way is different from our own.

"Hello person whose way is the way of the heart. I bet you can help me get out of my own head a little bit."

"Hello person whose way is the way of the hands. I bet you can help me put this inward faith into action!"

"Hello person whose way is the head. I bet you can help me come to clarity about why I feel the way I feel and do the acts of service I do"

We are the clearing in the wilderness called Shadow Rock. In the middle of the clearing are the three campfires of theism, non-theism, and atheism. Let this be a year of adding to our new Holy Trinity of Campfires an understanding and balance of head, hands, and heart.

## **ADDENDUM FOR REFLECTION**

### **The Symbolic Meaning of the Turtle (From the Life Balance Institute)**

Sea turtles are more ancient than any other vertebrate animal: they watched the dinosaurs evolve and even become extinct. They survived the Earth's ages of ice and continue to flourish.

Through the ages and cultures, turtles have many meanings. Some believe the turtle is the symbol of the primal mother and connected to the lunar cycle.

In the Far East it was believed the shell was a symbol of heaven and the square underside was a symbol of earth. The turtle could help you unite heaven and earth within you own life.

Ancient myths describe the world as resting on the turtle's back.

Others believe the turtle is associated with longevity, great age, and wisdom.

The turtle represents and has qualities that are congruent with the beliefs and teachings of the Life Balance Institute. The turtle naturally withdraws and goes within when in turmoil. It does not need to learn the importance of this, it naturally knows.

The turtle's whole life is one of steadfastness of effort and patience. Slow and steady: A life of 'non-doing'. There is a saying "home is where the heart is". The turtle is always at home within itself.

May we learn from these ancient creatures.