

MAKING IT OVER THE HURDLES (MT 16:21-28)

Sermon given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges,
Sunday, August 28, 2008, St. John of the Cross

Life has gotten back to normal at the Hodges' house this week. The Olympics are over and now we can get to bed at decent hour and return to our usual routine. I have to admit that I love the Olympics and I've learned to appreciate most events. But there is one event that I truly dislike. It brings back memories of my past and still to this day sends shivers down my spine. It's the hurdles.

You see sophomore year in high school I decided to go out for track. Track was one of those sports that everyone who tried out made. There were so many events; they needed everyone they could get. My coaches decided to have me run the hurdles. I was petrified. When you run the hurdles you have to get the timing down so you take just the right number of steps. My coaches wanted me to take three steps, I wanted to take five. I had a great fear of not making it over the hurdles. And even if I made it over one, all I had to do was look down that long track and see that there were still plenty more to come.

The word "hurdle" is appropriately used for all kinds of challenges in our lives. Sometimes hurdles are physical barriers, but not always. For most of us hurdles are not seen in positive light; they are stumbling blocks that make life more difficult. The fact is we try to go around hurdles, remove them, avoid or ignore them. However, eventually we learn that somehow we have to make it over them.

Sometimes the stumbling blocks in life are actual people. In our gospel reading today, Jesus knows his divine mission is to suffer, be killed and then raised on the third day, but Peter appears as a stumbling block to him. Peter wants to stop Jesus from following his path. Now Peter may have had good intentions. After all, he had heard of John the Baptist's death and probably did not want his friend and mentor, Jesus, to die similarly. Peter may have been trying to protect him, but Jesus knew what he was called to do. Peter only hears the suffering part of story and does not understand Jesus will be raised. To wake him up, Jesus tells Peter to move out of his way. Jesus'

words sound harsh, but Peter's role as a disciple was not to stand as an obstacle in Jesus' path. He was to help clear the hurdles for Christ, not create them. Jesus tells Peter to get behind him and in doing so Peter is now in a position to follow.

Sometimes people are stumbling blocks to us. They become the big hurdles we have to jump over to do what we feel God calls us to do. Before I was a priest, I was in public relations for 14 years. I had started in this field after college, working for agencies and a couple of not-for-profits. Things had gone well and at the urging of a past client, I opened my own business, which I had for five years. Now many people thought I had a good deal, and I did: I had a healthy stream of clients, could work from home and set my own hours. But underneath it all, I was restless. The public relations business did not fill me at the heart level. When through the church I brought Communion to the sick and thought about going into full-time ministry, my heart was full. I started discernment and enrolled in seminary; my call was confirmed and I knew that the priesthood was what God was calling me to.

Now people who did not know me well usually had one of two reactions. The first group was what I would call the "curiously supportive." These people were intrigued by the change I was making and encouraged me to continue. The second group, well they may not have said it, but I could see it on their faces...they thought I was crazy. Why would someone give it all up, the security, stability and normalcy? It did not make rational or reasonable sense. These people could have been stumbling blocks for me, but for once I listened first and foremost to God

Each of us has knowingly or unknowingly created hurdles for someone else. We may have even done so with good intentions, thinking we knew what was best for them, that they needed protection, safety and security. We may not have wanted things to change. We don't want friends to move and we often want family to do things we are comfortable with. Most of us have been on both ends. While trying to follow our own paths, we have stumbled over other people. Yet at times, we have been the ones to trip someone else up. Who are we to stand in the way? Who are we to be stumbling blocks in other people's faith journey?

Now here's the real eye-opener, the third way people are stumbling blocks. Sometimes we are stumbling blocks to our own spiritual growth. Think back to our Moses' story today. God calls Moses to lead God's people, but Moses' response is "Who am I Lord to do this?" There are all kinds of excuses not to do what we hear God calling us to: We are not worthy. We don't have the knowledge or skills. It's not our job. Sometimes we are just lazy or complacent. But often our excuse is the exact same one I used when I stared down that track at that long line of hurdles: "God, I don't want to! I'm scared and it's just too hard."

God calls each of us to greater discipleship. This is what God did with Moses and what Jesus did with Peter. Deeper discipleship means having the faith that we can make it over the hurdles; remembering those words God offered Moses, "I am with you." God will give us what we need to carry out God's plan. Greater discipleship also means not becoming stumbling blocks for other people, supporting them in their faith journeys, even if it means putting their relationship with God before their relationship with us. And finally greater discipleship means not creating hurdles for ourselves. When a hurdle or stumbling block is in your path, do not let it get best of you. Ask yourself, "What is the right and godly thing to do?" Don't give yourself any excuses. Don't talk yourself out of it. Take the higher ground. It may not be easiest or quickest way, but as Paul says in Romans, we will be able to live peaceably with ourselves and each other.