

# *“Stumbling Servants, Uncomfortable Comforts, and The Mysterious They”*

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**North East United Methodist Church**

**Mr. Bob Laird**

*<sup>15</sup> But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup> keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. <sup>17</sup> For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.*

-1 Peter 3:15-18

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## **PART I: STUMBLING SERVANTS**

A couple of Sundays ago, we turned back the clocks an hour for Daylight Saving Time. This morning, we’re going to turn them back a bit more – all the way back to 1995. It’s been six years since I accepted Jesus Christ as my Personal Lord and Savior! I’m learning the ropes and it’s cool but, I’ll be honest...it was getting boring! As a Christian coming of age, I needed a swift kick in the backside – a jumpstart! So, I’m lying on the couch...probably at 2-3 in the morning, flipping channels and I run straight into this...



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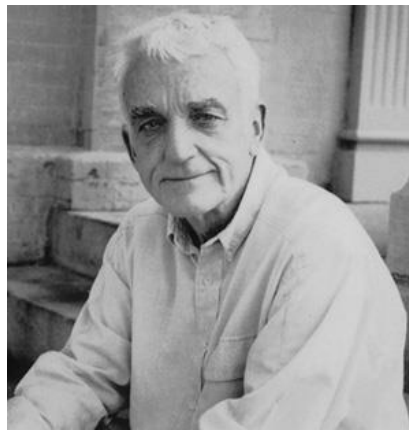
*“People say I’m strange does that make me a stranger,  
‘cause my best friend was born in a manger?  
What will people think when they*

*hear that I'm a JESUS FREAK?  
What will people do when they find that it's true?  
I don't really care if they label me a JESUS FREAK!  
There ain't no disguising the truth!*

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This was something I could grab ahold of and make my own in some small way. In all my excitement, though, I almost missed God's message. I didn't even realize it until the band put out a live CD which included many of the same songs; including the one that mattered the most. "What if I Stumble?"

The song opens with this very ominous quote from Brennan Manning, the author of the bestselling book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*.



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*"The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."*

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Manning's words and the hook to this song perfectly express a great misunderstanding; that if we don't live perfectly, our mistakes and poor choices will lead someone away from Christ. I most definitely misunderstood that.

Let's look at 1 Peter 3:15...

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*But in your hearts revere Christ as lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...*

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Until that point, when I read “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you” ... I thought it meant that I needed to have my gospel presentation down as tight as a “Four Spiritual Laws” tract. I had to study hard every day so I could be the Great Apologetics Ninja. Then to make it even more fuzzy, I thought...be happy, be well behaved, be nice everyone. Everyone will want to know why and as soon as they asked, I was poised to go tell it on the mountain— “why it’s Jesus of course!”

Yet, somewhere in my subconscious, I had that dcTalk chorus on loop like an earworm:

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*“What if I stumble and what if I fall?  
What if I lose my step and I make fools of us all?  
Will the love continue when my walk becomes a crawl?  
What if I stumble and what if I fall?”*

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I didn’t understand that Peter’s encouragement was to readily share the hope of the gospel, and I didn’t understand that the point of dcTalk’s song was that when we do stumble—and it is inevitable that we will—we can have confidence that God loves us despite it all:

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*“I hear You whispering my name (You say)  
My love for You will never change (Never change)”*

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God redeems sinners. His forgiveness is perfect and powerful enough to bring us from death into life. But even our forgiveness, applied imperfectly human to human, harnesses great weight.

A humble apology is disarming. It mends instead of escalating conflict and can start to heal even the deepest wounds. Most importantly, asking for and extending forgiveness offers better insight into what it means to be a Christian—that we are foolish, fearful, helpless, redeemed, purified, and welcomed members of the new family that God is building here on earth and into eternity.

## PART II: UNCOMFORTABLE COMFORTS

Now that we know a little bit about how we can walk in Him without a fear of stumbling, let's peel back another layer. Everyone is always talking about how we need to get out of our Comfort Zones, right? They sure are – and we're gonna do some of that right now!

*Congregational Discomfort Zone exercise: **The Two Pew Switcheroo!***

Now, are we all sufficiently uncomfortable and at least a little bit outside of our comfort zones? Did you notice that some played this as Noble or Daring? That's all fine-and-dandy but at the end of a busy day, are we craving an even longer, more miserable night? No! Do we want to do housework or the kids' homework? No! We want to put our feet up...grab a quart of Ben & Jerry's, turn on *Game of Thrones* or maybe the ballgame, and climb so far down INSIDE of our comfort zones that nobody can see us for a while!

Now what if I told you that you can stay right there inside your comfort zone and serve God? That'd be awesomesauce, right? Not so fast. Where exactly is the comfort zone of a Christian? What's it look like? I'll tell you this? It ain't just chillin' on the beach with your beverage of choice perched in the sand next to you. Not at all. A Christian's comfort zone is loaded with other stuff but it's a comfort zone that's far more in touch with reality. Don'tcha just hate it when someone is trying to comfort you and they're not in touch with reality? Or they're not even connecting with you 'cause they're just waiting to compare your situation to one that is somehow like yours – or just to give you their latest news? THIS comfort zone is in touch with human need. In touch with what is on God's heart.

SO.....What exactly is Christianity that is able to comfort? I see it in three parts.

COMFORT-able Christianity...

**1) ...knows pain and suffering!**

Haven't had your morning cup of coffee yet? Welcome to COMFORT-able Christianity Having one of "those" days? Welcome to COMFORT-able Christianity. Worst week ever? Welcome to COMFORT-able Christianity.

What were you expecting anyway? Did you come to Christ because you thought it was going to be a pyramid marketing scheme for successful religious living? No! Most of us were drawn to Jesus because of our life circumstances. We

got down on our bellies...on our faces...with no place to look but UP... humbled. THAT's why we ended up at the FEET of Christ!

The Christian life is filled with pain and anguish. It's filled with bad stuff...heartbreak...broken relationships... sickness...and pure grief. Let's remember...Christ didn't exactly have a cakewalk either. It was a tough life that ended in betrayal, unimaginable suffering and, ultimately, death on the cross. But, he had a purpose. To bridge that gap so eternal life would be available for all of us.

SO.....There IS a purpose to our pain! Look back at 2 Corinthians 1, Verses 3, 4 & 5 with me.

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*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.*

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Through Christ, our COMFORT abounds...it OVERFLOWS! Paul is telling us that for all the SUFFERING that flows in our world, the more COMFORT that there is in us to pour out as well. Maybe it would be nice if the flow could be dialed back a bit? But, at the heart of it, there's assurance in knowing that our pain serves a purpose.

So, next time things get all cranked up. Maybe we don't run away but, instead, run straight ahead like First Responders – knowing that Jesus will be there in the midst of it all? He will be there.

COMFORT-able Christianity...

- 2) **knows a hope beyond the here and now** – in other words...it's not trusting in its own resources/strength.

The only reason that we can truly have this perspective of pain & comfort is that we have a hope that is beyond the here and the now. The Christian FAITH that is able to comfort is not done by its own strength – in the strength of the ONE who is able to conquer sin and death.

Look back in 2 Corinthians at verses 8-10a.

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*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again.*

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Paul is readily admitting that he was in deeper than he could handle. But in the same breath, he also reveals where his strength came from. It wasn't from his own grin-and-bear-it attitude....it wasn't from his own resources. He looked to a hope that had already raised others to life.... a power that could wipe out the forces of death. Paul had a hard gig proclaiming the gospel as radically as he did BUT PAUL KNEW that the same God who resurrected Jesus from the dead could resurrect him from exhaustion.

For us to live out a comfort-ABLE Christianity, we are called to do the same. Not to try and plug away in our own strength to solve the problems of the world but to truly rely on HOPE in the power of God to do what he needs to do.

COMFORT-able Christianity...

3) **knows the partnership of prayer** - it leans on the prayers of others.

One more time in 2 Corinthians – Chapter 1 Verses 10b-11.

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*On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

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WHY do we pray for one another? Is it so we can magically feel better like some good luck charm? No! It's because we because we rely on each other in order to feed our hope with prayers! If you and I pray together for something, you too get in on the GLORY of answered prayer! Isn't that cool? You get to share in on the blessings...just 'cause you prayed.

I am convinced that God is calling us, as his people, to comfort. If we, here at North East United Methodist Church, become known as a people who live humbly within this Comfort-Zone of Christianity. How amazing would it be to just be a living WITNESS to the comfort of God? We could do that, couldn't we?

### PART III: THE MYSTERIOUS THEY

Now we've been digging deep, peeling back the layers. I want to shift gears for a second and come back up to the surface. I'd like to talk about an activity which occupies so much of our daily time and energy...Serving Others.

When you think about it, we spend a large part of everyday serving all kinds of people. A mother preparing supper isn't just cooking spaghetti; she's serving her family. A father helping with homework is serving his children. Shoveling your neighbor's driveway is serving. Helping someone in the church to paint their garage is serving. Even the small things like holding the door for someone with their arms full...there is very little of our time that doesn't involve serving in some fashion.

Now, when we talk about servanthood, we're not just dealing with one narrow slice of the Christian life. We must talk about the "How?" and the "Why?". A lot of this service is quite unrewarding. No matter which aspect we are talking about – work, family, church life – when we try to serve others, we often end up frustrated and discouraged.

But didn't Jesus command us to do this? Didn't He say that his purpose in coming was to give us abundant life? Are we somehow wrong to expect that, by obeying his command to serve, we would experience satisfaction and fulfillment? Why, then, does serving others frequently prove so unfulfilling?

You already know the answer...

...it's people.

We get discouraged because the people we are trying to serve often don't seem to appreciate our hard work and sacrifice. They may ignore what we've done for them, or take it for granted, or they may even criticize us! "How dare they!" we say to ourselves (and our Facebook friends). "After all I've done!" It's hard to keep loving, and serving, and sacrificing, for people who don't smile and say, "thank you."

How do we cope with that? How do we find joy and satisfaction in serving others? Well, for one thing, we have to realize that God has the same problem.

In Luke 6:35, Jesus said,

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"... love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."

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The point of this verse is that we should follow God's example. He blesses the unappreciative and those that refuse to even acknowledge him. He blesses people who don't give thanks and who arrogantly insist that the good things they receive from God are merely the product of their own labors, cleverness, or luck. He blesses the wicked - people who curse his name, who reject his authority, whose sins offend, disgust and anger him.

Even Jesus, the most humble, loving, self-sacrificing man who ever lived, was hated and rejected. In the end, he was crucified by those he came to save - yet how many of those standing at the foot of the cross even understood, much less appreciated, what Christ was doing for them? How many of the soldiers, or the spectators, thanked him? Most were taunting and insulting him, jeering, laughing. How painful, how heart-wrenching that must have been! And how tempting?



Knowing that he could simply speak a word, hop down off the cross, and all of them would have been annihilated.

Yet despite their monstrous ingratitude, he gave his life for them, and for us. And so it should be with us. When we continue to love and serve people; give ourselves to people even when they respond with indifference, we are following Christ's example.

Do these people you're serving deserve to be blessed? Probably not. Guess what? Neither did you and neither did I. That knowledge must help us to do the right thing and direct our actions.

But what about our hearts, you might ask? We still feel disappointment when our service isn't appreciated. That's the tough one! The reason for our service must be to please and honor God. Our focus can't be on ourselves, receive thanks and we most definitely can't be keeping score.

Does your husband or your wife criticize you more than they praise you? Does he, or does she, take you for granted? Do your children not appreciate all that you do for them? Do they grumble and complain? Are you undervalued at work? Does your service to your employer go unrewarded? Does it seem as if your service to other believers is unnoticed or unappreciated? Is your service to the church not recognized? Nothing you do in his name, not even the smallest act of mercy or compassion, will ever go unrewarded. We [as a congregation] may not notice, but remember that the most important thing isn't to please any of those people. Just please God. Don't lose heart. Don't give up.

In fact, our works of service shouldn't even be done primarily for the benefit of the person we are serving. Yes, we're trying to help them. Yes, we care about them. But our goal in doing so is to please God, no matter how they respond. Our true purpose in serving is not just to serve those folks but, also, to serve God.

We are always performing for an audience of one. If He is pleased, it won't matter how people respond; whether they thank us, or curse us, or ignore us. Whether we receive credit, or thanks, or honor, or recognition is irrelevant. We don't need those things because THEY are not necessary!

And - while we are here - who exactly is this Mysterious THEY anyway? Have you noticed how They shows up everywhere we go? "Some people I spoke with said that THEY don't like it when..." "Oh really? Well what did They prefer as an alternative?" "Oh, I don't really know. They just wanted this to be dealt with" "They" is an intentional diversion being perpetrated by the person speaking. The reason can be any multitude of things but, all that "they" can do is lay something out in the open and wait for a result – good or bad. They cannot move positively toward a goal and surely can't serve God's needs because their only goal is to serve humans.

Paul really can't make it much clearer for us can he?

Look at Ephesians 6: 7-8.

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*Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.*

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**Look at Colossians 3: 23-24.**

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*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

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NOT PEOPLE! NOT FOR HUMAN MASTERS! The goal is to please Christ, to honor Him, and if we succeed in that, then we're satisfied.

But what if I accept all this; what if I make it my primary goal, even as I serve others, to serve and please God, and yet I still feel discouraged? How can I keep giving without receiving? Simple...you can't. And God doesn't expect you to. Serving and pleasing God is the primary goal but we also look to him in another way.

God is the strength for our service. He is the source of our power. It's great to get praise and appreciation from people; lots of "attaboys," lots of thanks and gratitude. But even if those are available to you, if you depend on them to fill up

your emotional and spiritual bucket, then someday you'll run out. People are fickle. One day you're the hero, the next day, you're the goat. And when that happens, you will have no resources, no strength, to continue serving. God's resources won't run out. He promises us a limitless supply of life, and strength, and power.

### Wrapping Things Up?

As I set out to prepare my closing, I realized that I had this slightly offbeat title and three mini-messages for you rather than one larger sermon. I know that there is a purpose in it for each of you – you just need to take a few minutes extra with God this week for some clarification. So, I'd like to get that started for you right now with prayer. Join me?

### Closing Prayer

Dear God...Where was all this heading? Lots of good stuff thrown at the wall...what's supposed to stick this time? Please bring a spirit of encouragement as we spend time with you in prayer and in the Word. We want to abide in you. To draw our life and strength from you. Let us drink deeply of the Spirit and trust in your renewing power. Your grace is always sufficient and by Your power, we will be able to love, and serve, and sacrifice fearlessly. In the strong name of Jesus we pray. Amen.