**18 Pentecost, Sept. 27, 2015, Esther 7, Ps 124, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50: Rev Mary S. Trainor**

As most of you know, I love to hike. Jim and I hike not only on trails in the woods and shores in Wisconsin, but we go all over in Michigan and Minnesota -- and have put many miles on our hiking boots in the National Parks of the West. Oh yes, we love to hike. There are numerous challenges that we have encountered on our hikes. Most people think that these challenges are bears or bad weather or snakes or river crossings. But, these actually have not been issues. The challenges that have been of particular concern, requiring our continuous attention, are two things that begin with R: rocks and roots. Oh yes, stumbling over rocks and roots that are hidden in the trails are a constant and continuous concern. If you are not paying very close attention to where you are putting your feet, roots and rocks can trip you. When you are 7 miles out at the halfway point on a remote trail with no way to obtain help if something bad happens, the last thing you want to do is fall flat on your face or break an ankle or hurt your back.

A few years ago, a friend of mine asked us if we would officiate at the marriage of her daughter in Charlottesville, Virginia. Jim and I instantly said yes, and so we traveled by train to the site of the wedding. The day before the wedding, before the rehearsal, we had a few free hours on our own -- so we went up to the Shenandoah Mountains to take a short hike on the Appalachian Trail. We didn't have our usual hiking gear along, like our good boots and our hiking poles, but we went anyway. And, oh my, it was so beautiful! I was so excited to be out there on this famous trail, that I forgot my usual vigilance at watching for rocks and roots in the trail. And, sure enough, I stumbled and fell. I looked up at the trail after my fall, and saw the culprit: a stub of a root hidden in a leaf pile in the middle of the trail. You can guess what happened next: Jim helped me up and bandaged my wounds, acted as a crutch for me to use in hobbling to the car, and took me to the emergency room in town. I missed the rehearsal. At the wedding the next day, there I was on crutches with big bandages around my arm and leg. Not exactly the way we had planned things to be!

Today, Jesus uses the word "***stumble***" twice in our Gospel reading. The word "stumble" is actually found 35 times in the Bible! It does not only mean to trip in walking, it means to err, to slide into a crime or error. I slid into my fall because of the root, and on our Christian journeys through life we can stumble and fall away from God. In this Gospel, Jesus is alerting us to be cautious about the stumbling blocks in our lives, whether they be things that come from within or from others. We not only need to avoid sinning ourselves, but we need to avoid leading others into sinning. Jesus says, "***If any of you 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."*** We can be stumbling blocks to others, we can put roots or rocks in the pathway of others -- and others can do this to us. We are all influenced by others, and it does seem like if someone else is doing it (whatever "it" is) then it is ok for us to do "it" too. Right? Think about driving, for example: if everyone else on the road is driving way above the speed limit and not getting caught, then it seems like we have permission to do this as well. Another example is alcohol. If we have friends who are alcoholics, we are a stumbling block for those friends if we drink around them. Our behavior might cause them to go back to drinking....we are being the rock in the trail of life that makes them trip. A third example is anger: I went to a big league baseball game last year where one set of guys started shouting and swearing at a particular player who was doing poorly, and pretty soon there were lots of people in that area of the ball park going bonkers all screaming horrible stuff.

So, what are we Christians to do, in light of all the temptations that are out there? The last line of our Gospel tells us: "***Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another***." In other words, we are to sprinkle God's love wherever we go, and make peace. Salt is a preservative, and we as believers are to preserve ourselves and those around us from the corruption of sin. Salt is a flavor enhancer, and we Christians are to (through the power of the Holy Spirit) influence the world for good, bringing comfort where there is pain, bringing light where there is darkness. When I bless the Holy Water for Church, I always add some salt -- this is a reminder to all of us that we are to be sprinkling God's love wherever we go.

And our Epistle reading today from James tells us some specifics of what we can do. James tells says, "***Are any among you suffering? They should pray...Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord....The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."*** My brothers and sisters, we have been given each other for support and encouragement. We have been given each other for prayer. And, we can help each other to get on and stay on the right pathway in life. James said, "***if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul.***"

Bullying is a big topic in the news lately, and because of the tragedies it has caused there has been much research around it. It turns out that recent research shows that bullying stops when someone takes action, speaks up -- but if no one says something, if no one steps forward to help the person being bullied, then the bullying tends to continue and worsen.

We can be the rocks or roots for others to trip on in the hiking trail of life, or we can be the ones who smooth the path and provide a helping hand. The opposite of a stumbling block is an encourager. It is our choice every day, in every interaction, which to be.

We have help figuring out which path is the right path. We have help in navigating the rocks and roots in the journey of life. Today's Psalm tells us where to turn for this help, "***Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth"*** (Psalm 124:8). God is here to help us all the time, and God sent us each other to be with, pray with, and encourage one another. Praise the Name of the Lord. Alleluia. Amen.