

Sunday, July 8, 2018
Mark 6:1-13 (pg 40 of NT)
“Failure and Discipleship”
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He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Redeemer, Amen.

Very early in my ministry I struggled mightily with what it meant to be a preacher.... One Sunday I preached a sermon that was particularly convoluted. As I stood at the door and shook hands, I noticed that people had trouble even looking me in the face. Finally, one person, the last woman out the door, said, “Thank you, pastor, for your sermon.” I responded, “I appreciate that. But it was too long.” The smiling woman replied, “No, it just seemed that way.”

Sometimes in spite of our best intentions, in spite of our best laid plans, in spite of our very best efforts, we face failure. We don’t like to hear this but it’s true. We are not ultimately in control of our successes. Not even Jesus was. Our morning text tells us that in spite of the powerful teaching of Jesus, in spite of the authority of his words, in spite of the fact that he healed people of their infirmities, they did not believe in him in his *own* home town of Nazareth.

But the absolutely amazing thing to me is that this experience – what for most of us would surely have felt like deep personal failure – becomes for Jesus a moment that is pregnant with possibilities. Instead of becoming discouraged, Jesus takes the biggest step of his life up to that point – he embarks on his teaching and healing ministry – and, get this – he uses the failure in his home town as a lesson for the new recruits he has just commissioned for that ministry: “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you,” says Jesus, “as you leave, shake off the

dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” In other words, “Do as I have done, don’t take it personally, shake off the dust of failure, and move on.”

In my last Church, Sequoyah Hills, in Knoxville, Tennessee, I was teaching an officer training class. We were talking about facing our fears and our failures. The biggest fear of failure that was identified by the class was that of public speaking. A member of that class asked me if I had ever found public speaking – and specifically preaching – difficult.

His question gave me the opportunity to share, that of all the tasks of ministry, when I first got out of Seminary, I found preaching, by far to be the most difficult. I recognized good preaching when I heard it but producing it seemed all but out of my reach.

I am also more naturally introverted and getting up in front of a huge crowd of people was enough to cause me to break out into a cold sweat every week. What I didn’t tell the class at that time was just how bad at preaching I really was.

As most of you know, I actually grew up in the United Methodist Church and began seminary (even though it was a Presbyterian seminary) intending to become a Methodist Minister. I made it all the way to my last year of seminary before deciding to become a Presbyterian minister. One of the incidents which led to this eventual decision occurred during the fall of that year. It was during that time that I had to take ordination exams for the Methodist church. Like the Presbyterians, the exams covered five different areas: Theology, Ethics, Pastoral Care and the Sacraments, Polity, and Biblical Exegesis and Preaching. Out of the five exams, I passed all but one with flying colors. And you can probably guess now which one I failed – preaching. Yes, your pastor is nothing more than a reject from the Methodist Church.

If I had passed preaching, I would have immediately been ordained as a Deacon (which, in the Methodist church is a stepping stone toward being becoming a full minister) and thus would probably be a Methodist preacher somewhere in Central Virginia today. But God had other plans – a winding road of adventures in the church I could only dream about – and in a completely different denomination.

I really was terrible at preaching. I was a decent writer when I had the time, but an overly self-conscious public speaker. Even when I had a good sermon, my delivery was more like that of an auctioneer – fast and flat. And yet I was burdened with this strange calling to share my take on the good news that, in spite of my weak spirit, faint heart and poor execution, would not let me go.

I had tried my best in seminary but I just didn’t get it. Preaching class was an absolute miserable experience for me. I felt awkward and stupid. And man did I struggle when I had my first church. Nobody knows more about the true meaning of a month of Sundays than a Preacher who takes his or her first church. Whew!

Writing decent sermons takes a lot of time and learning how to be competent in all the other areas of ministry was already overwhelming. In those early days, there just didn't seem to be enough time in a week to ever meet the demands of professional ministry and the sermon, well, it was just the easiest to put off.

And yet, I'll have to tell you, I really learned more about how to preach in serving congregations, living out my calling, than in all my time in Seminary. I learned from trial and error – from the successes – and particularly from the failures – of having to do it week in and week out; from learning to trust the Holy Spirit at work in the honest and often painful feedback I received from the people I served. From learning what to let go in order to adequately concentrate on what, for any congregation is the most important hour of the week – worship.

It was in this way that I believe I was transformed from a “preacher without a clue” to a “servant with something to say.”

Failure happens. Things do go badly. We mess up big time. Unfortunately, our culture has little or no place for the failures. It celebrates only the winners – especially the winners in money-making – regardless of how the money is made. I continue to be absolutely floored by the fact that people with money are treated in our culture as if that fact alone somehow makes them wiser than the rest of the population. But that is a whole other sermon. What I want to talk to you about this morning is that central to the teaching of Jesus is that Christian disciples embrace failure and loss. It is part of the package. This does not mean that Jesus encouraged a kind of reserved fatalism; quite the contrary. We are to put our whole selves into whatever it is that we feel called to do.

That's what can make failure, when it happens, so devastating. However, if we cannot accept the possibility of complete, radical, personal failure in the carrying out of our calling, we are not really relying ultimately on God and we are not really free. We're not free to live. We're not free to love. We're not free to serve God.

What we are is like so many at the highest level of our government, believing that with the right amount of will power we can control the outcome things and if not, well we will create so much chaos that at least the other side loses too. If I am going to suffer loss, then so is everyone else. But there is another way – the way of being faithful to our call and leaving the rest up to God – which is scary – since that often means suffering alone. However, knowing that God is in control is also relief. It is actually good news because it means that *our* perceived failures may actually be God's victories.

There is an ancient Chinese story of an old farmer who had a horse for tilling his fields. One day the horse escaped into the hills and when all the farmer's neighbors sympathized with the old man over his bad fortune, the farmer replied, “Bad fortune? Good fortune? Who knows?” A week later the horse returned with a whole herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good fortune. His reply was, “Good fortune? Bad fortune? Who knows?” Then, when the farmer's son was attempting to tame one of the wild

horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad fortune. Not the farmer, whose only reaction was, “Bad fortune? Good fortune? Who knows?” Some weeks later the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer’s son with his broken leg they let him off. Now was that good fortune? Bad fortune? Who knows?

Who knows? Only God knows. But our greatest failures may actually be but the building blocks for God’s victories. Look at Jesus. His life ended in complete and utter failure – death on a cross. Yet God’s plan all along was to use this to demonstrate what it really means to love and to show that resurrection was just around the corner. So the cross was the calling of Jesus and he knew it. His whole life was ultimately about cross-carrying rather than banner waving.

Failure leads to little more than hopelessness, depression and rage if there is no sense of either seeking or serving a higher purpose or calling. That calling comes from within and is confirmed from without as one begins to move in that direction. We are living in trying times when new injustices are being perpetrated against vulnerable populations every day – not in the Middle East or Russia but right here at home. Maybe you are feeling the urge to do something. If so, make yourself open to that. Actively scan for ways you might get more involved. Come see me and together we work it out.

If you already are gripped by a calling, throw yourself into it like those disciples. Don’t wait for the resources. Remember, they carried nothing when they were sent out. Look for unlikely others to join you. Talk to leaders here and elsewhere and put yourself out there ready to be knocked down if necessary but more than willing to serve.

And when you are knocked down as more than likely you will be, get back on your feet quickly. As the disciples were told by Jesus, shake off the dust and get up. Be like former linebacker greats Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens, Jack Lambert of the Pittsburg Steelers, or Dick Butkus and Mike Singletary of the Chicago Bears. They all had a knack for making the tackle even when they initially got blocked out of the play. The way they did it was by getting up quickly after getting knocked down. In fact, Singletary says the way he got knocked down was always the best clue as to where the play was headed. Similarly, the way we fail can tell us a lot about where we need to be headed next.

If you are feeling defeated at the moment, take a break: Most failures we suffer are not as catastrophic as we have made them out to be, even though they may seem so at the time. So it makes sense to reduce our tension by doing something else for awhile. Remove yourself temporarily from the fray. Redirect your energy towards something else that you know is life giving – something that reminds you, you are loved and grounded in God’s grace. Take a walk, get away with someone who loves you, relax. In all of the gospels we witness Jesus doing this regularly. The scriptures tell us that he went off to a deserted place to pray.

Find someone or some group that you trust that you can talk to: That is what being a part of a community of faith is all about – having brothers and sisters in Christ with whom you feel free to confide and share your triumphs but perhaps especially your failures.

But the point here is not to allow the letdowns surrounding the things you feel passionately about to poison your attitude toward people. It is so easy to do these days because there is so much ignorance, callousness, outright lying, and cruelty that is tweeted out regularly every day and is being swallowed as the gospel by a large portion of our population. But, when you feel defeated, you are to get back on your feet, redirect your energy towards your calling, and find a friend or a set of friends for support

There are tremendous disappointments and terrible failures that come directly as a result of following what we believe God is calling us to be and do, but that reality doesn't necessarily reflect the long range plan of God. When we feel discouraged, we need to keep two things in mind:

- (1) God is still sovereign and
- (2) People are gonna do what they want to do and *what* they do is out of your control.

This should free us from being obsessed with trying to control everything in our life and our calling as Christians. We need to try to grow through the pain of defeat and remember that nothing is accomplished without risk.

We need to especially remember in times of deeply personal defeat that God's love for us is even deeper. How deep is God's love for us? How deep is God's forgiveness for us? How deep is God's power for us? How deep will God really go? All the way down. You may be struggling with things bigger than you are, things bigger than your family is, things bigger than all of us put together.

But however far down you've gone in mismanaging your life, messing up your marriage, misjudging God's plan, ruining your reputation, compromising your morals, stifling your imagination – dragging your soul, drugging your mind, or wrecking your body, one thing is true and it is the final word given by Jesus on this earth: "Lo I am with you always – even to the end of the earth."

Let us pray: Gracious God, in all our personal failures and defeats, help us to remember that you are sovereign and that you have a mysterious plan for us that is better than anything we could conceive.

And now bless these gifts that they may help provide the resources for future failures carried out in your name and in the name of the gospel. Amen