

Embracing Failure

Luke 4:14-30 and Matthew 13:53-58

Did Jesus fail? As a finite and embodied person, he certainly seemed to fail to live up to his own expectations and desires. Jesus performed many great miracles throughout Galilee and Judea, but he could not do the same in his hometown because of their unbelief. His family and neighbors in Nazareth (as well as his fellow-Jews in Jerusalem) seemed to explain him away rather than try to comprehend what he communicated. In Luke 13:34, Jesus tenderly described what he longed to do for Jerusalem, yet it did not happen. So many people who were so close to him seemed incapable of grasping who he really was and what he was really about. Failure to fulfill his own expectation for others is something with which Jesus became well acquainted.

Jesus also failed to fulfill the expectations of others. He could not control the responses of the masses who heard his declaration of good news and witnessed his miracles. The Jewish leaders were outraged by miracles on the Sabbath. The rich young ruler turned his back on an invitation to be a life-long follower. The disciples were one big adventure in missing the point. Jesus' context was not rigged so that those around him would just robotically do his bidding or fulfill his expectations, so he entered into the helplessness of being unable to control how others would respond. Almost everyone around Jesus expected to be delivered by a conquering king, not a suffering servant.

Part of living fully human lives is learning how to fail. Jesus teaches us how to do so, gracefully and without sin. Jesus knew what he could know within the time he had been given, and he did well. And then he left the rest that was incomplete in the hands of the disciples who would go on and do greater things than he had done. In certain ways they would experience success where he had known failure. Part of our own growth into spiritual maturity is first accepting responsibility

and then accepting the limits to our responsibility. There are problems to which we can offer solutions and people who we can genuinely help, but we must also acquiesce to the limitations of what we can accomplish. Sometimes the best we can offer is to stand back and respect the freedom of the other. God values human freedom in such a way as to draw back his sovereignty to provide space for it, and we must follow suit. We, as God's creation, often want to extend our borders and ascend to the place of God. Many would just as soon shed their humanity and take their place at the helm of the control room for the world. But we cannot change the past, control the reaction of others, or fix everything that breaks. And once again, we learn that there is life to be found in our limitations.

There is only so much that any of us can do or accomplish, and there are gifts that come our way when we are able to accept this. As we honor the limits of our responsibility, we give others the freedom to live their own lives and the grace to find their own rhythm. When we truly own our humanity and all of its limitations, we make room for others to develop their own pattern of life and succeed (or fail) on their own. Allowing others to nurture their own sense of responsibility means we often have to surrender our own. As difficult as this can sometimes be, it is a huge burden released from our shoulders. We give the gift of freedom to others and we receive a certain freedom for ourselves. No one but God can carry the weight of the world, but we often try and relieve him of the burden. To be content with our limited gifts, responsibility, and humanity liberates us from the endless striving after the impossible, making possible a deeper peace and joy. We are freed to be nothing more and nothing less than our true, authentic selves, possessing only limited responsibility and control ... which leaves us room to fail. In this way, all of our limitations are sacraments that remind us that we are only human, and that is enough.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

God grant me the serenity

to accept the things I cannot
change; courage to change the things
I can;
and wisdom to know the
difference. Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a
time; Accepting hardships as the
pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful
world as it is, not as I would have
it;
Trusting that He will make all
things right if I surrender to
His will; That I may be reasonably
happy in this life and
supremely
happy with Him forever in
the next.

Amen!

For Reflection:

- What might be some of the differences between good and realistic expectations and false and unreal expectations? Why is it important to recognize those differences?
- What are some ways that you can maintain a healthy tension between accepting responsibility in life and accepting the limits of those responsibilities?
- What could be some examples of practically valuing another person's freedom? Why is it often very hard to stand back and respect the freedom of others? Why is it so important that we learn to live in this place of respecting others and their freedom of choice and action?