

July 12, 2009

Mark 6:1-13

How We Can Learn From Failure

We can learn to forgive ourselves and others, and not be afraid to lead healthy and whole lives.

Some projects we undertake start out clean, but quickly gather a layer of dust to themselves.

Anyone working with wood knows the longer it is smoothed and sanded and sculpted, the deeper the pile of shavings and sawdust grows underfoot and on the project's own surface.

Only when it is all finished can we wipe and shake all the dust away, leaving a clean surface.

We have to know when it is time to blow the dust off, roll up our sleeves and start working; and when it is time to shake the dust off, redirect our energies and go on our way.

Jesus' words and directions at the beginning of the disciple's work reveal that he too knew there was a time to get down to work and time to get out and get on.

At the same time, Jesus gives his disciples power and authority; alongside his confident directions to "travel lightly," Jesus gives his disciples guidance on how to deal with failure.

Following Christ, preaching and teaching and living in the power of his name, does not mean the life of Christian discipleship is insulated from failure.

In fact, Jesus knew that failure would be such a recurring possibility in life that he provided his followers with a sacrament of failure.

Just as there are ways to live which teach the world about Christ, there are also ways to fail that are uniquely Christian.

Failure or what the late futurist Don Michael of the University of Michigan called "error embracing," is going to be a big part of anyone's life.

Nobody likes to hear they are going to have to face failure in life -- not the disciples 2,000 years ago, not people today.

But understanding how Jesus' own ministry, how his very death, provided all with a sacrament of failure that can empower.

I learned this when pastoring what was then the fastest growing new United Methodist Church in Macomb County; New Baltimore: Grace.

There is nothing like successes to make anyone's fear of failure grow. To combat those fears I put down some thoughts. I re read them from time to time.

As servants of our calling we must fight against the almost pathological desire and expectation to be liked by everyone.

Somewhere we have imbibed the heady notion that if we sow love and compassion in our community, we will reap love and compassion -- and perhaps even acclaim and recognition.

Jesus sowed love and compassion, and he reaped death on a cross. No matter how hard we try, there are always some people that just won't accept us.

Some relationships which get off on the wrong foot always remain left-footed, if not flat-footed.

There comes a time when we need to shake the dust off our feet, commend failed relationships to God and spend our time building other or new relationships.

The apostle Paul offered an equally consoling piece of advice to his fellow failure-prone Christians in Rome: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

(Romans 12:18).

Paul does not say we will always succeed in achieving a peaceful environment.

He does ask that we make every effort to bring this peaceable state into existence -- but he knows there will be times when it is impossible, when division and rejection will make success beyond our grasp.

That is the time when we must shake the dust off and move along.

I would like to offer these tips on how to handle failure and defeat gracefully. They can be made to apply to everyone.

1) Get Back on Your Feet:

Be like former Chicago Bears linebacker great and current head coach for the San Francisco 49ers Mike Singletary. While playing for the Bears he had a knack for making the tackle even when he initially got blocked out of the play.

The way he did it was by getting up quickly after he got knocked down the first time.

2) Take a Break:

Most defeats you suffer are not earth-shattering, so it makes sense to reduce your tension by doing something fun for awhile.

Take a walk, play a game, relax.

3) Find a Friend You Can Talk To:

Your spouse or a close friend is the one to share most things with, especially personal hurts, but it's good to always have someone with whom you can discuss your latest defeat.

Don't let the normal letdowns of people's negative attitude affect you.

When you feel discouraged, keep in mind that

(1) God is still sovereign (in charge) and

(2) People will do what they want to do.

This should free you from being obsessed with trying to control everything in your life. Try to grow through the pain of defeat and remember nothing is accomplished without risk.

As Theodore Roosevelt said, "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

Tom Landry, Chuck Noll and Bill Walsh accounted for nine of the 15 Super Bowl victories from 1974 to 1989. What else do they have in common?

They also boasted the worst records of first-season head coaches in NFL history.

How deep is God's love for you?

How deep is God's forgiveness for you?

How deep is God's power for you?

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How deep will God really go? All the way ...

All the way down!

You may be struggling with things bigger than you are,
things bigger than they are, things bigger than we are ...

However far down you've gone in mismanaging your life...
However far down you've compromised your morals...
However far down you've stifled your imagination....

One thing is true: Here comes the words of Jesus ...

"Lo, I am with you always ..."

Amen.

