

Mark 8:31-38
Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2024
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As it turns out, failure is an option. I understand why “failure is not an option” is part of the mindset of the NASA space teams and why it makes a great tag line for the movie about the Apollo 13 mission. But failure is actually an option. You may have noticed that failure and the flailing feeling that comes with it is part of the story. I’d even go so far as to say that failure is a part of the story of every single person sitting here this morning.

And it’s not just us at Calvary. Failure is not only an option, it’s a given.

I tend to think that when things break or go awry or collapse that I’ve done something wrong. When plans shatter or even when people shatter, I want to argue that this is not the way life should be. Maybe you do too? We tend to think that decay and disarray mean something is amiss, and that even death is something to be denied. I have some ideas about where this tendency comes from, but the main thing to realize is that it doesn’t come from Jesus.

“Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.” Interesting that here he *began* to teach them, suggesting that maybe it took awhile for the disciples to understand that triumph wasn’t the whole picture. Peter famously rebukes Jesus, and Jesus tells him essentially that ideas about perpetual growth, upward trajectories, and even uninterrupted happiness come from Satan and from humanity’s wishful thinking.

And, it’s not just Jesus who must undergo great suffering and rejection and death. If we want to follow Jesus, you and I have to relinquish that same wishful thinking of constant success and optimization and winning, and pick up our crosses and hold on to other broken things. We have to lose and lose and lose.

Before we go any further, I need to make something abundantly clear. I do not believe that God causes all this distress and hardship. You may feel differently, but I do not subscribe to the idea that God pokes and prods, sending calamities of a personal or global scale to punish us or to make us stronger.

I believe that that failure and loss and other tragedies are part of a finite, limited world. And that instead of saying that God does this *to* us, I hold on to the idea that God comes into this finite, limited world to be *with* us when these small and large disasters unfold.

So, when Jesus enters the scene and starts talking about losing everything, I hear him saying ‘quite openly’ that a broken world needs a story about breaking. The true story that Jesus began to teach his disciples and that we are still trying to learn is that there’s no way to dodge pain. What it means to be a Christian, in one sense, is to live with eyes wide open about our hurts and the world’s hurts and to respond with as much compassion and solidarity as we can muster - trudging alongside folks, all of us carrying our broken pieces.

When we think about it with some clarity, we know that perpetual health and endless growth can’t be normative, as much as we might wish it so. Yet in our overconfidence in our human ways, we still focus on success as if failure were not an option, and our attention, our clinging to progress bulldozes over the reality of vulnerability and suffering.

When this happens it means that a lot of people who screw up
or get sick
or just stub their toes
or those who are trapped in generational poverty
or caught between borders
or who will just plain not get a happy ending in this realm are all made to feel invisible at
best and are blamed and shamed at worst.

The message from Jesus somehow got convoluted like in a bad game of telephone and at the end of the line we heard that if you're losing at life, then you're doing it wrong, oh and also God is lost to you too. How did we get there? When over and over again the stories of Scripture suggest that God is found in uncertainty, danger, and suffering. And as Jesus pointedly and 'quite openly' proclaims, it is precisely to the place where human wisdom perceives God's absence: on a lonely hill in pain, that he is heading. If you and I are hell-bent on pretending that everything is always fine and that we have no ugly insides, then we are going to miss the whole point of what's about to happen.

It begs the question: is the Jesus story a "success" story? In part yes, we know that death doesn't get the final word. Yet, if we only tell that part of the story we aren't telling the whole story and we aren't telling the whole truth. Losing and hurting and even dying are part of the story. Maybe the message got convoluted along the way because it doesn't sound like good news; maybe over the centuries the original message of the prophets and Christ got garbled even on purpose to make it more palatable.

On the surface it doesn't sound like glad tidings to say that loss and rejection and crises are built in. But when we've been humbled by failure, when we're sitting at the bottom of a pit, it is actually the best news of all to know that Jesus is climbing down to hang out with us while we are there, and he does that because he's familiar with the way down.

He's not pretending that failure isn't part of life around here.

I've been re-reading and thus quoting Madeleine L'Engle a good bit lately. She tells stories for kids and for grown-ups about how hard it can all be, how confusion and separation and difficult paths are real and true. In her non-fiction she lays it out without the gloss of plot and magic. "I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. It is when things go wrong, when good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, that God is most present.

When things go wrong, not if, when good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, when we lose and flail and fail: a broken world needs a story about breaking.

There are crosses to carry, not trophies. Following Jesus doesn't lead to prosperity and triumph; we're not supposed to gain the world, to win it all.

So, if you've ever wondered if you're the only who feels lost and afraid, or if you've been told that faithful people are somehow exempt from feeling lost and afraid so you must not be all that faithful, or maybe you've even been led to believe that God got you lost and sent you reasons to be afraid in order to prove something, Jesus is here to teach you and the rest of us that we've got it all wrong again.

We are setting our minds on human things, human wishful thinking, not divine things: the divine understanding that this world is breaking and that God is unfailingly present in the breaking.