

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

April 24, 2016

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Clarksburg, WV

John 21:1-19

After this Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me." (John 21:19 N.R.S.V.)

First You Fail

The disciples were in a major funk. There they were, sitting on empty pickle barrels at the local store, all of them staring into the fire. It had all been a roller coaster. First there was the high of the Palm Sunday procession into town. Then the low of Judas betrayal, Peter's denial, and Jesus' death on the cross. Then the high of Easter morning when the risen Lord had appeared to them. Just for a bit everything had seemed right with the world again. Then Jesus had left them to ascend into heaven.

He had told them to spread the good news to the world. When Jesus had stood in the room with them, that had all seemed easy. But now that he was gone again, reality was sitting in. They were in a funk because they didn't have a clue as to how they were supposed to change the world. They were thinking about Peter's denials and Thomas' doubts. It wasn't that they had lost confidence in Jesus. They had lost confidence in themselves.

Suddenly Peter announced, "I'm going fishing." They all exchanged quick glances and muttered one after another, "I'm going with you." It is not a surprise really. When we fail at something new, we tend to fall back on what we know. The disciples may not even have liked fishing, but it was what they knew.

So off they went to fish. They fished all night and caught nothing at all. What happens when we try to do something without Jesus? Nothing happens. Even though they were professional fishermen, they caught nothing all night.

I love this story. It is so down to earth. The disciples aren't heroes in this story. They act a lot like most of us. The neat thing about this story is that even in their failures, Jesus gives the disciples what they need.

When Jesus first appears on the scene, the disciples don't recognize him. Maybe it was the poor light of early morning. Maybe it was because Jesus was the last person they expected to see. More likely it was the simple fact that the disciples were distracted by their troubles. They felt like they had failed as disciples. And now they felt like they had failed as fishermen. They were in a great funk!

Then Jesus tells them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat. The surprising thing about this story is not that they then caught a whole net full of fish. The surprising thing is that they were willing to try the other side of the boat. You remember how brash Peter could be. I expect him to say something like, "Hey carpenter, I have been fishing all my life. I don't tell you how to build a house. You don't tell me how to fish."

That Peter didn't say that, is perhaps the greatest evidence that he was really down. So they threw out the net on the other side of the boat and they caught a great catch. That must have caused them to take another look at the stranger on the shore and in that moment they recognized Jesus.

Let me suggest that this story shows us how important our failures are. Failures are an important part of spiritual growth. There is a popular myth that says that if you are a good Christian you will float from victory to victory. That is nonsense. Time and again the scriptures show the ups and downs of the faith. Everyone goes through down times, the so called dark night of the soul.

It is failure that teaches us to keep the faith. Think of a person you know whose faith you admire. Ask that person how they got so strong in the faith. That person you admire will tell you that their faith was strengthened by going through bad times.

Listen, I am not going to tell you that it is fun to go through failure. Failure hurts. It hurts a lot. When Peter realized that he had denied Jesus three times, he broke down and wept bitter tears.

Yet it is only by running out of self power, that we learn to rely on Holy Spirit power. The disciples had to come face to face with the fact that they didn't have a clue as to what to do next. They had to fail first, before they could be open to listening to Jesus.

This is true for churches as well as individuals. Most of us don't like change, particularly in the church. We have enough change and stress in our jobs and families. We want church to be where we find comfort and stability. Right? So even when we are not catching fish or people anymore, we want to keep fishing like we have always done. What does it take for us to stop what we are doing long enough to hear Jesus' voice? What does it mean for us today to throw our nets on the other side of the boat?

I won't sugar coat this. Failure breaks some people. Other people grow stronger, and learn from their failures. I read an interesting bit about George Washington in Dynamic Preaching. It seems that George Washington, the father of our country, lost his first big battle. Washington was a young major in the Virginia Militia. He was sent with 350 raw recruits through the wilderness to a fort where the present day city of Pittsburgh now stands. The fort was occupied by the French. When Washington went to engage the enemy, he found himself vastly outnumbered by the French and their Indian allies.

The Indians were experts in the kind of run and ambush fighting that best suited that wilderness country. Washington ended up giving up his sword, and signing an article of surrender. He limped back to his beloved Mt. Vernon in disgrace. That was the father of our country.

Washington, however, didn't give up. He learned from the native Americans how to use the countryside to fight your enemy. Washington became a far better leader and commander because of this experience.

Any motivational expert will tell you that great leaders learned from their failures and keep going. But it is here that the Christian has the great advantage. In our story for today, the disciples had given up. Then Christ came to them by the sea shore. They didn't go find Jesus. He found them.

There is a wonderful story about a four-year-old girl who wandered away from her family's campsite and got lost in the woods. The mother and father were frantic with worry and searched for hours before they finally found her.

As the father scooped up the little girl in a great big bear hug, the little girl said, "I finally found you." I thought that story was precious. Often we think that we have found God, when in reality, he has found us.

Jesus knew that the disciples were in a funk. He knew that they were in trouble, so he went to them. He not only went to them. He also gave them what they needed to get back to God's agenda. Which is spreading the good news.

Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times because that is the number of times that Peter denied Jesus. So three times Peter was able to reaffirm his love. "Lord, you know that I love you." Then Jesus told Peter what he needed to do. "Feed my sheep."

With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the disciples did just that. And that is why we are here today. We are here because the Lord worked through their failures to strengthen and deepen their faith.

The Lord stands willing to do the same for us modern disciples. First you fail, then you grow spiritually. Failure still hurts, but it is not the end. Instead failure is part of the journey.

As we go to silent prayer, I invite you to mediate on these two questions:

1. What is God saying to you in this message?
2. What are you going to do in response?

Amen.