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## *Godly Failure That Trumps Success*

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**A sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith**

And Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

But he turned and said to Peter, ". . . You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things . . ." (Matthew 16.22-23)

Shouldn't we cut Peter some slack here? Shouldn't we show him some sympathy for what happened to him in today's gospel? After all, he was bold enough to speak up when he heard Jesus announce his imminent suffering. He just happened to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. And this time Jesus gave him a hard time for it.

Probably if he had said the same thing earlier in the ministry it would not have provoked that shocking response from Jesus' own lips: "Get behind me, Satan!" But at this point Jesus has to set his face like a flint to go to his destiny in Jerusalem. So this time he needs a disciple<sup>™</sup> or two<sup>™</sup> who understands the rigor of that mission; instead of Peter's misinformed attempt to protect him from it!

But we all know the motivation for Peter's misguided effort. We know it, because we all share the same generic fears of failure that prompted Peter's outburst, "God forbid it, Lord!" You know what I mean:

the fear of not finishing what you started;  
the fear of failing to get ahead;  
the fear of falling behind others;  
the fear of failing to have enough;  
the fear of being taken advantage of;  
the fear of failing to make enough.

We all share these fears because we have all failed in experiences that make failure forbidding to us. Such failures are even forbidding when we see them happen to others, particularly to those whom we care about or honor and respect. And that's why the chief apostle exclaimed to Jesus as he did in today's gospel, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

It was not because Peter did not support Jesus' messianic mission. Rather, it was because he mis-identified the failure of that mission with his own experiences of human failure. But in this case there was about to occur a "godly failure" that Jesus understood was necessary for him to undergo in the holy city.

"At that time," says one version of today's gospel,  
At that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised (Matthew 16.21).

Now notice that the final clause—the bottom line—of this litany of suffering and calamity is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Thus as that other apostle, the apostle Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians chapter 1 (1.25):

God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Or, to paraphrase the same claim in terms of today's gospel:

"Godly failure is more successful than human success."

Now let's take a closer look at this type of "godly failure" that in Jesus' case was so different from the human failures we're all too familiar with. And I want to have a little fun along the way. For example, there's the story about a professor at the famous university, MIT, who for years offered a course that required students to study the nature of failure.

His syllabus explained that he taught the course because failure was a far more common experience than success. A clever interviewer once asked him if any students ever failed his course on failure. Right! Thinking back the professor took a moment to consider his answer:

"No, but . . . there were two incompletes." [<http://des.emory.edu/mfp/efficacynotgiveup.html>]

Yes, we're all naturally reluctant to admit failure—even when the stated goal, in this case, is to understand the reality of failure! Indeed, the grace and wisdom of intentional failure might be an interesting way to describe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Consider a similar case of denying failure. This story comes from the life of that legendary hunter and explorer, Daniel Boone. It is said that Daniel Boone was once interviewed about his reputation as a great woodsman and wilderness guide. In the interview he was asked if he had ever been lost in the wilderness. Like the professor, Boone took a moment before he answered,

"No-no . . . but I was once bewildered for about three days."  
[<http://des.emory.edu/mfp/efficacynotgiveup.html>]

Yeah. There we are! By all means we avoid admitting failure. We would rather consider it a temporary lapse in our customary path toward assured success. By contrast, in a peculiar way Jesus celebrates his status of worldly failure; his being "lost," if you will, lost to this world's system of rewards and values. Instead of avoiding that kind of failure he touted it as a different order of success:

"For what will it profit you," he insisted, "if you gain the whole world, but forfeit your life? What will you give in return for your life?" (Matthew 16.26)

Now "gaining this world" is what people like you and me here today are constantly exhorted to do; from our schooldays to our deathbed never a moment's rest from shrewdly scheming and strategizing how to gain this world. Instead of all that, Jesus charged us even to "forfeit the world" so we don't "forfeit our life." Give it a rest—have a life! I have a colleague at Emory University who says, "Can you just breathe?!" And then Jesus declares further, if we do that, if we find a way to have our life at the risk of forfeiting the world then we will gain access to a reality that surpasses—that trumps all those worldly, human values with a transcendent, divine reality.

Now something like that is what he began to show his disciples in today's gospel. "From that time on," the gospel says, he began to show them a type of "faithful failure" that can look like ordinary failure but is actually more successful than ordinary success—a godly failure.

Now consider two more secular examples: failure in the life of two famous Americans, one a president and the other an inventor.

As a young man, Abraham Lincoln went to war a captain and returned a private. Afterwards, he was a failure as a businessman. As a lawyer in Springfield, he was too impractical and temperamental to be a

success. He turned to politics and was defeated in his first try for the legislature [hold on], again defeated in his first attempt to be nominated for congress, defeated in his application to be commissioner of the General Land Office, defeated in the senatorial election of 1854, defeated in his efforts for the vice-presidency in 1856, and defeated in the senatorial election of 1858.

At about that time, he wrote in a letter to a friend, "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth."  
[<http://des.emory.edu/mfp/efficacynotgiveup.html>]

The pathos of that expression is perhaps only paralleled by its eloquence; Lincoln's characteristic ability to articulate. Even today, more than a hundred years later, we can still "'feel your pain,' as we say nowadays. [Here was a "man of sorrows" if there ever was one. Cf. Isaiah 53.3; King James Version.] Yet even his failures render him an icon of ironic success" the irony of a "'faithful failure' that persists, again and again, in "'showing up"' showing up for a life worth living; "'hoping against hope' (Romans 4.18).

Let's shift now from Lincoln's struggle with good cheer to another icon of success with a more upbeat character: the inventor, Thomas Edison.

Thomas Edison's teachers said he was "too stupid to learn anything." He was fired from his first two jobs for being "non-productive." Finally as an inventor, Edison made 1,000 unsuccessful attempts at inventing the light bulb. When a reporter asked, "How did it feel to fail 1000 times?" Edison replied, "I didn't fail 1000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1000 steps."  
[<http://des.emory.edu/mfp/efficacynotgiveup.html>]

Well something like Edison's "'1000 failures' is being celebrated in our scriptures for today. And the insight, that it was "'not a thousand failures but a thousand steps,' is the "'spiritual equivalent' of our Lord's call to "'take up our cross,' daily" and thus, 1000 times, 1000 times a day if you will" to "'forfeit the world' rather than "'forfeit our life.' On that messianic scale, with that kind of index, what seem like failures will actually be steps along our "'way of the Cross,' steps toward our "'resurrection life,' and steps toward our achieving the messianic character of Jesus himself: "'getting a life,' the life of Christ in us. "'Christ in us, the hope of glory' (paraphrase of Colossians 1.27).

In today's reading from Romans, the apostle Paul highlights the extraordinary character that we are all becoming by taking up our cross and daily following Jesus. Earlier in Romans Paul had exhorted his readers,

brothers and sisters . . . do not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12.1-2)

But in today's reading from Romans Paul goes on to describe what we will be like as achieve that godly character. He gives a character profile of who we are becoming that might rival many other profiles that we have in worldly systems. As we fail, so to speak, to be indignant over our experiences of suffering, Paul implies that we will become "patient in suffering."

And as we fail, so to speak" maybe in 1000 steps" fail to persecute those who persecute us we will rather, he implies, be "blessing them . . . not cursing them.'

And as we fail, so to speak" maybe in 1000 steps" to be elitist and superior we will "'not be haughty, but associate with the lowly . . . [and] not claim to be wiser than we are.'

And as we fail, so to speak" maybe in 1000 steps" to "'avenge ourselves' we will "'not repay anyone evil for evil . . . but leave room for the wrath of God,' thus producing in ourselves a Christ-like character that, as the apostle puts it, is "'not overcome by evil, but overcomes evil with good' (Romans 12.1-2,10,12,14,16-17,19,21).

In those terms, finally, we will achieve a great reverse of that solitary state described in our gospel today when Jesus is standing alone, although in the company of his disciples, alone having the courage and foresight to set his face toward Jerusalem and embrace the suffering that will crown his destiny. (He will no longer be alone with that kind of stature.) Nor

was his suffering in that solitary state of that other "man of sorrows," Abraham Lincoln, who declared that "if what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth."

No: what is promised in this "way of the cross" is the gospel good news that the godly character of Christ has been "distributed to the whole human family." And now Jesus is no longer the solitary figure that we see in our gospel today; no longer a singular case of the Christ-like behavior listed in Paul's exhortations in our epistle today. Rather he is joined by a world of godly companions like us here today; ourselves his beloveds, befriending one another; consoling, comforting, supporting and encouraging one another along this way; not leaving us in solitary, agonized suffering as with Abraham Lincoln, but becoming buddies and friends of Christ; believers like us who render him no longer a solitary redeemer but the elder brother in a teeming family of redeemed humanity.

*Thanks be to God! Amen.*