

A is for Effort

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1 Samuel 16:1-7

Mark 8:22-26

I've been thinking a lot lately about times when I've failed. There was the time in college when I choked on the final and ended up with a D in my literary criticism class. My straight-A honor roll persona had a hard time with that failure. So much so I tell the story the way I just told you, instead of leading with the truth that I spent too much time in library with my friends instead of really focusing on Aristotle and Plato and countless others we were supposed to read. I still can't make much sense of those guys.

There's my failure to really learn how to swim. When I was nine years old, the 8am swim lessons in the freezing cold lake were more character building than skill building. There was no way I was putting my face in that water; I could barely put my body in that water! I still don't like to put my face in the water. I do love to be in the water, I'm a Pisces through and through. But I'm a feet on ground, head above water kind of swimmer, which is to say, not much of a swimmer. I've "adapted" my swim stroke but even when I last took lessons as an adult, it was when we shifted to the backstroke when my swim instructor admitted, "ah, now we have finally found your stroke!"

Then there was my first summer at seminary when I took German so I could pass the language exam for my M.A. program. That didn't go very well. New York is hot in the summer, and we've already established that I can be distracted. I failed the exam but I solved my problem of how to finish my degree requirements another way. That fall I switched from the two year M.A. program to the three year M.Div. program, which had no modern language requirement. I admit, I never really gave scholarly German another thought.

All these examples are so sweet in retrospect, aren't they? The way I'm telling it now, all these years later doesn't really capture my fear of father's reaction to my grades or my competitive frustration to this day at the pool. If I knew how to swim...if I hadn't gotten that D... If I hadn't failed German I probably wouldn't be standing here with you today! So I give the Holy Spirit credit where it's likely *not* due and mosey on with my youthful failures building my adult life. It's really quite a wonderful way to approach it, if the mistakes of youth are the extent of one's failures.

I got to thinking about failure lately because I was realizing that we don't talk about much as adults, or more precisely, we don't talk about failure much in the present tense. Failure is embarrassing. We especially don't talk about failure very often in relation to our spiritual life. Do we fail in our discipleship and live to tell the tale?

You might be thinking that you would like to challenge me on this assertion. At first glance the disciples seem like excellent models for failure, but if you really think about it they are more like models for misunderstanding. We know a lot of the gospel stories where they just don't get it. "It" being everything from who Jesus is to how to heal to why it's important to stay awake at times to what the parables actually mean. They are so clueless at times even Jesus shows his frustration with them. We neglect their post-resurrection accomplishments, like fostering the movement of Christ-believers that would become the foundations of Christianity. Their youthful misunderstandings come close to our own hearts. We feel a comradery in their questions, their lack of eloquence in asking, "how are we supposed to feed all these people?" their inability to heal, their petty arguments about who will sit by Jesus in heaven. It makes us feel like we can do this discipleship thing. We got this! But let's be honest, with exception of occasionally not being able to drive our demons, they don't really fail as much as they misunderstand.

Sometimes our failures are more than not perceiving a situation correctly. We let people down. We lose our minds. We jeopardize our relationships. We fail at controlling our addictions, our anger, our pettiness. We confess these things every week in prayer, but what does understanding failure really mean for our discipleship? Is discipleship all about picking ourselves up again? Is our faith and our discipleship a "try, try, again" kind of project? If so, how do we forgive and move on? Are we simply to understand our failure in light of God's grace? I know we are sinful and we all fall short, but frankly, I'm looking for something between Calvin's total depravity and oversimplifying our failures into God's providence. I want to know how to walk with the failures I can't tell stories about yet.

We talk often enough about the things that pull us away from our faith, or from our discipleship. We recognize that temptations lurk, that parts and sometimes all of life is difficult. Is there a way to make sense of our failures beyond the growth points of our youth? Does our being pulled away teach us something that we should be paying attention to? Is there room for failure in who we are as people connected to God? The older I get, the more I hope that there is room for failure and I've been seeking ways lately to acknowledge my failures in ways that don't just try to explain them away but which allow me to embrace them.

I was filling out some ecclesiastical paperwork a few weeks ago and I stumbled upon this passage from the community of Mark's gospel that Bob read for us this morning. It's hard not to love this interaction between Jesus and the blind man. It is so vulnerable and human, on all sides. Commentators love this narrative. It is squeezed between the miracle of Jesus and the disciples feeding over five thousand people with seven loaves and a few small fish and Jesus asking his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The healing of this man's blindness is most often understood in metaphorical terms. Like him, the disciples can't see clearly at first, but then they are able to see. Peter's proclamation of Jesus as Messiah a few verses after this story is a pivotal point in this gospel. It stands in stark contrast to a question of challenge Jesus put to his disciples right after they fed all those people, when he says to them, "Do you have eyes, yet fail to see?" In this sandwich interpretation, this two phased healing is so clearly about the development of understanding among the disciples. It is about perception and our ability to first understand very little and then slowly have our eyes opened to the call of our discipleship.

Among all four of the gospels, this inability of the disciples to really understand what Jesus is teaching is most prevalent from the community of Mark. The disciples are painfully human in their lack of understanding. What seem obvious to us as readers is not at all obvious to them. This story seems to really capture how they grow and begin to perceive things differently. When it is understood as metaphor it seems such a beautiful example of what I was suggesting earlier that discipleship has so much to do with how we learn to see with more clarity.

It works so well at conveying this metaphor, yet some problems spring up with this interpretation. First, this passage is one of the rare passages that appears only in this gospel. In our weekly Bible study we talk a lot about how the gospels intersect with one another. Recent New Testament scholarship teaches us the gospel communities that gave us Mark, Luke and Matthew shared some source that helped shape the framework and commonality of sayings and stories. While Mark's community was the sparse with words, the communities of Luke and Matthew have a lot of the same stories, often in the same order. How those gospels shape those stories through their community's own theological lens are a bit different. This wonderful metaphor for the disciples gaining sight and perception is not included in any of the other gospels. It leads to speculation as to whether it is an embarrassing story about Jesus. The gospel of John does not share the overlapping framework with the Synoptics but it does come the closest to telling this story. In John 9, a man who was blind since birth is healed, but there is not this messy mud and spittle situation. The latest of the four gospels, John's community has a strong theological agenda that does not mesh well with a Jesus who is less than able to heal the first time around. So, along with a very short list of other stories – parable of the secretly growing seed (Mark 4:26-29), the healing of the deaf and dumb man (7:31-37), sayings on salt (9:49, 50b), and the flight of the young man in the garden (14:51-52) – this healing is unique to Mark's community in describing Jesus as not succeeding in his first attempt to heal this man.

This story also does not appear in the lectionary, the weekly three-year cycle of readings from the Bible that we typically use as a liturgical guide. One could begin to wonder then, what is this story doing here and why don't we read it very often? And if it is meant to highlight the development of the disciples understanding of Jesus' work, why submerge it? Lifting this story up would seem to help that interpretation.

So much ink is spilled on the disciples' failures, on Jesus using his spit on this man's eyes – the NIV even translates this verse that Jesus spit on this man's face – and whether or not that made him a magician, or what it meant. It's so bodily, however we understand it. It holds the intimacy of physicality in a very powerful way. We've already explored the context and what it might mean metaphorically about perception and what the disciples were able to "see." The more I read about spittle and saliva, about the disciples being "middle-blind" that is able to see but not perceive, the more I wondered if this narrative wasn't best understood with Occam's razor. You remember good ol' Franciscan Friar William of Ockham who proposed that the "simplest answer is most often correct." Maybe the first time Jesus tried to heal this man's blindness, it just didn't work. I'm probably walking a sharper razor's edge that Occam's by suggesting this idea about Jesus, but do we simply have a story here of Jesus failing? He was after all fully human. Does it help us at all to consider what this story might mean for us if Jesus failed?

I confess, it helps me. I lack Jesus' grace in failure to simply lay my hands on the problem again. I am more likely to cry or fight my way out of the embarrassment. I might

convince myself a lie is the truth to justify why I failed. I might walk away. I might flee. I might not want to talk about it. I might lie to myself about what happened. I might wallow in guilt.

I might feel trapped because there is no way I can correct it. Have you ever found yourself responding to failure in any of these ways? Failure is really, really, hard. If the disciples' failures so easily become our own, can Jesus' failure also become our own? Can we see ourselves not in the difficulty of our lack, but in the awareness of what within our present failures is beautiful? Not just what we learn or that we are enfolded in God's grace, that's true all the time. There can be beauty in failure. There can be tenderness in failure. There can be openness to forgiveness that is beyond what we could ever understand in success.

To fail, and to admit our failures – not just the old ones that led us on a different path – but our down to earth, day to day failures. The parenting mishap, the divorce, that colleague we too often end up arguing with, the project or the sermon that just doesn't come together, the lack of attention to a struggling friend or parent. To fail, and to admit our failures also creates vulnerability. I guess that is what I like most about thinking about Jesus failing in this healing attempt. He is so human, so vulnerable. And that aspect of failure is part of what makes the incarnation so wonderful for us. Jesus is not just divine, he is fully human. Like us, he fails. Like us, he is vulnerable. Like us, he has to open himself up to forgiveness. He has to find courage. He has to move forward.

Our discipleship is not about our egos. Jesus reminds us of that characteristic right in this story. His ego is not bruised by this failure. He shows us the beauty, the tenderness, the way that we can move in failure as easily as success. In that movement there is courage and vulnerability. Like our success stories, our failures show our beauty, and our discipleship need not aspire to cleaning everything up, doing everything well. Failing in our discipleship may just open us up to something we could have never seen in success.