

Sermon Labor Day Weekend (Proper 17)
August 30, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

Making Peace With Failure

Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"
Exodus 3:11

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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things."
Matthew 16: 21-21

One of the wondrous things about human beings is our capacity to be inspired, moved by the examples of others or by an idea or possibility to strive for what is beyond our reach. We were created to live by the lights of our dreams. When we are inspired to fulfill the extraordinary potential that lies within every ordinary human life, we can do amazing things, and live in grace-filled, if fleeting, moments, as Lincoln once said, "according to the better angels of our nature."

This summer has been, in the midst of all else we might say about it, a season of inspiration. Olympic athletes showed the world what it looks like when human beings set their sites on physical goals that are impossible to attain by any standard except what's driving them inside. You would have to be made of stone not to be inspired by their example, knowing that with even a fraction of their dedication, discipline, and resolve, you might accomplish something that seems impossible, too.

In national politics, the summer reached its inspirational climax this week for Democrats and begins tomorrow for Republicans, as leaders and aspiring leaders from both parties make their case to the American people. They're all doing their best to inspire us with their vision of what our country could be. How we vote will, in large measure, rest on who succeeds in inspiring us, whose vision for the future resonates with what we hope for, and who best convinces us that despite how much it costs simply to hold our own lives together, we play a part in the destiny of our nation.

One of the best reasons to be part of a religious tradition and faith community is for the inspiration we receive here to live according to the highest of spiritual ideals: forgiveness, compassion, hope, love, and justice. This summer some of us read the memoir of Sara Miles, a chef-turned-journalist-turned-(to her great surprise)-Christian who was determined to feed hungry people right from the Eucharist table of her church. Others from St. John's traveled to Alabama and helped build a house secure enough to withstand the hurricane winds that will blow over Foley, Alabama as soon as tomorrow. Some are inspiring us to provide scholarships for the children of our partner congregation in Haiti, while others are preparing us for essential public witness later this fall. Still others have kept the spiritual light burning here week after week while many were away. Several beloved members of our congregation died this summer, and several babies were born. Some are dedicating considerable energy to political work in this political time; others are facing tremendous personal struggles with dignity and grace.

Each person here has an amazing life story to tell, and perhaps most inspiring of all is when we take the time to listen, really listen, to one another, and hear what lies beneath the surface of what we see. We're all here, gathered each week around the gospel and table of Jesus, who is, as the prayer says, "the way we need to follow and the truth we need to know." Through his grace and love, we are strengthened and inspired to continue on.

The downside of all this inspiration, of course, is how miserably we can fail to live by it. There is, in the words of the Buddhist writer, Pema Chodron, "an irritating, if not depressing, discrepancy between our ideals and good intentions and how we act when we are confronted with the nitty-gritty details of real life situations."¹ She tells a story on herself to illustrate the point:

I was riding on a bus in San Francisco, reading a very touching article on human suffering and helping others. The idea of being generous and extending myself to those in need became so poignant that I started to cry. People were looking at me as the tears ran down my cheeks. I felt a great tenderness toward everyone, and a commitment to benefit others arose in me. As soon as I got home, feeling pretty exhausted after working all day, the phone rang, and it was someone asking if I could please help her out by taking per position as a meditation leader that night. I said, "No, sorry, I need to rest," and hung up.²

This is another, admittedly less wondrous, human experience: we are continually faced with our failure to live according to what inspires us. In many, if not most efforts to strive toward our highest ideals, we fail, and it's not because we are bad people, but that at the end of the day, we're tired.

If we aspire to more than making it through the day, we need to make our peace with failure. For the more we aspire to, the greater the likelihood that we will fail. More than once, we will fail spectacularly and publicly. *That* we fail isn't news, no matter how the media feeds on the pleasure we take in the failures of others. What is news, what matters, what has the power to change the course of our lives and history, is how we *respond* in the face of failure, what we do after we've fallen off the high bar in the middle of our routine. What do we do then?

Taking my inspiration from Scripture, I'd like to explore two experiences of failure. The first we might name after Moses; the second, after Simon Peter.

The Moses experience of failure is the one we know up front: when we're asked or feel compelled to do something that we know in advance is impossible. Moses' impossible task was to go before Pharaoh and ask him to let the Israelites go, and then to lead the Israelites, who had no reason to trust him, toward their Promised Land. For us, the impossible task might be related to some work project or goal; perhaps acquiring a skill that feels like the equivalent of learning how to breathe under water. It might be in the realm of our personal lives and relationships, when we are asked to speak what we're afraid to say, or change what has become entrenched through patterns of complacency; or

¹ Pema Chodron, *When Things Falls Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 114.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

conversely, to endure the unendurable, forgive the unforgivable, accept what cannot be changed, and make peace with what we don't want. Whenever something like this is before us, we stand at the edge, as Moses did more than once in his life and say, "I can't do this. What's being asked of me is beyond me. It is more than I can hold and more than I can bear."

The Simon Peter experience of failure is one that surprises us, catches us off guard because we thought we knew what we were doing or understood what was being asked. We imagined ourselves to be stronger, more intelligent, insightful, and competent than, in fact, we were. This is the failure born of arrogance, overconfidence, or immaturity—or, as in Simon Peter's case, a combination of all three. Simon Peter, you may recall from last Sunday, had just bolted to the head of the class with the inspired answer he gave to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah," Simon Peter said, "the Son of the living God." Jesus was amazed. "Blessed are you, Simon! For God has revealed this to you and you are the rock upon which I will build my church." Can you imagine how Jesus' praise made Simon Peter feel? Then Jesus went on to explain that being the Messiah meant suffering and death. Simon Peter couldn't believe it, and he took Jesus aside and rebuked him. "This can never happen to you."

Then, as you heard, Jesus rebuked him back in the harshest way imaginable, making it unmistakably clear that his star pupil, the golden boy of just seconds before, got it completely and dreadfully wrong. Imagine how that rebuke felt---although I doubt you have to, for most of us have been there, in that place of stunning, unexpected, and humiliating failure.

There are several things to distinguish the Moses experience of failure from the Simon Peter experience. In the Moses experience, we feel our failure even before we begin, and often the fear of failure keeps us from doing anything at all. In the Simon Peter experience, we plunge in, unaware and unprepared for the embarrassment and shame that awaits us. In the Moses experience, we're often too frightened to speak; in the Simon Peter experience, we babble on, saying things in our ignorance that we will deeply regret later on.

More instructive than what distinguishes these experiences, however, is what they have in common: that moment of realization and decision, when we know that we most certainly will, or most certainly have, failed. Pema Chodron describes it, in typically Buddhist understatement, as "a very interesting place to find oneself." It is also, she says, for the practitioner and person of faith, an exceedingly important place:

We continually find ourselves in that squeeze . . . It's often the place where people like ourselves give up. When we feel squeezed, there's a tendency for our minds to become small. We feel miserable, like a victim, like a pathetic, hopeless case. So believe it or not, at that moment of hassle or bewilderment or embarrassment, our minds could become bigger.³

She goes on:

Instead of taking what's occurred as a statement of personal weakness or someone else's power, instead of feeling stupid or that someone else is

³ Chodron, 116.

unkind, we could drop all complaints about ourselves and others. We could be there, feeling off guard, not knowing what to do, just hanging out there with the raw and tender energy of the moment. We have no ground to stand on, and at the same time it could soften us and inspire us. Finally, after all these years, we could truly grow up.⁴

Call it what you will—the place of squeeze, the moment of truth. It’s what happens next, after we realize that that we are standing in the gap between our ideals and our actions, between our dreams and our laziness, between our desire to be a good person and our fatigue at the end of the day. What will we do then?

Here’s what God would have us do. God would have us, in the first instance, face honestly and squarely what we cannot do. Moses asked God, *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?* Who, indeed? Who am I, who are you, to do the impossible? We can’t—at least we can’t on our own. But hear again what God said to Moses, and says to us in our Moses moments: *I will be with you.* What we cannot do on our own, we can do by the grace of God, with the power of God working in us, as St. Paul once said, “accomplishing in us far more than we can ask for or imagine.” Paul says in another place, “the One who has begun a good work in us will see it through to completion,” and in still another, “by the grace of God, I am who I am.” When we are asked to do what is beyond us to do, God promises to stand there with us in that place and lead us through.

And what does God say when we find ourselves on the other side of a failure we probably could have avoided, but for our pride or ignorance, or both? If what Jesus said to Simon Peter is any guide, God doesn’t spare us the pain of failure. But *afterwards* not much happens. The exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus never comes again. Jesus said what he needed to say, and that was the end of it.

That’s what God wants when we fail, spectacularly and through our own fault: that we simply go on and trust that God goes with us; that we get up, face the failure as best we can, learn from it whatever there is to learn, ask forgiveness, if forgiveness is called for, and begin again. There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, the old song tells us, and it’s true. There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea.

God isn’t going anywhere because we’ve failed. God *expects* us to fail, often. Simon Peter’s rebuke wasn’t the first time he got things wrong with Jesus, and it wasn’t the last, but he was never banished. While Jesus was quick to correct, he was quicker to forgive, and life went on. After the humiliation, the shame, the regret, the countless times we think through how we could avoided the stupid thing that we did, life simply goes on. We don’t have to endlessly berate ourselves for our failings and mistakes. We can accept ourselves as the wondrous species that we are: gifted with the power to inspire and be inspired well beyond what we are able to accomplish; and then asked to live graciously in the place of failure. That we fail is to be expected. What we do next is what God cares about most, and where God waits with mercy as wide as the sea and the strength to see us through.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 116-17.