

Failure and Following Jesus
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 16, 2021-PM Service
Reverend Ruth Boven
John 21:15-19

I wouldn't call myself a huge baseball fan. I did play Little League and enjoyed it. I've been to see the White Caps play. I even attended one of the playoff games in 1984 when the Detroit Tigers won the World Series. But I had never before heard the name Fred Carlisle Snodgrass until I ran across it recently. Yes. Fred Carlisle Snodgrass. That's a real name. And a real man. In fact, he was a pretty famous baseball player at the turn of the 20th century.

When Fred died in 1974, his obituary in the New York Times acknowledged his major league baseball career along with a few other life accomplishments. But here's the strange thing about that obituary—it focused primarily on Fred's biggest baseball failure. Here's how it reads: "VENTURA, Calif., April 5, 1974-Fred Carlisle Snodgrass, who muffed an easy fly that helped to cost the New York Giants the 1912 World Series, died today at the age of 86. Mr. Snodgrass played nine years in major league baseball with the Giants and the Boston Braves before moving to California, where he became the Mayor of Oxnard, a banker and rancher...Mr. Snodgrass made a two-base muff of pinch-hitter Clyde Engle's easy pop fly to set up the tying run. One man walked and another singled, driving in Mr. Engle to tie the game, and put the winning rim on third. A long outfield fly scored the winning run. He is survived by his widow, Josephine; two daughters, and five grandchildren."

I came across this story as I was reading and thinking about how hard it is to be marked by failure. That obituary was written 62 years after Mr. Snodgrass flubbed a fly ball and it's like little else in his life mattered.

I hope Mr. Snodgrass got over his failure quicker than the press seemed to. But here's the truth—sometimes we ourselves are the ones who have the hardest time getting over our failures. Sometimes we spend a lifetime squashed down by them or by our shame over them. Or, perhaps we try to make up for them by being perfect or successful or doing whatever it takes to prove our worth. Our failures and inadequacies even convince us sometimes that that's how God sees us too.

It's easy to look at someone else and imagine that they are so much better equipped, so much more together and obviously gifted to be used by God than I am. Maybe you are someone, so aware of your own short-comings, of your failures, of your secret struggles, that it's tough to imagine yourself as just right for service in God's kingdom. If that's you, there's good news for you tonight. Let me introduce you to Peter.

It's interesting that as the gospel writers tell their stories, it's Peter's personality that seems to emerge more than any of the other disciples. Peter helps us remember that Jesus' disciples were real people, living real lives, with real problems, and had real quirks—just like us.

Just like us, there were times when Peter's commitment to Jesus was as steadfast and courageous as they come. It had him stepping out of the boat in the midst of crashing waves, cutting off the ear of an enemy, and boldly claiming an unwavering, fearless dedication to Jesus.

If you're on the path of faith—you've had these moments too. Beautiful, profound moments when you're filled to overflowing with faith. Maybe it's happened in that dorm-room Bible study, or during your early morning prayer time. Your love for Jesus, your awe at what he has done for you burns bright. "I don't care what others do—I will follow you Jesus, no matter the cost. I'll lay down my life. I won't go back to those old sins. I'll give up my selfishness. I'll be more loving. I'll live more sacrificially. I am fully devoted to you, Lord."

But then—there are those other times. "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to Peter, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me, three times." And Peter did precisely that. "I don't know what you're talking about." "I don't know the man." "I swear; I do not know him."

I've often thought about how hard it must have been for Peter to look Jesus in the eyes again. I imagine my own sense of failure and shame would make it excruciating to ever face again the one I'd so

vehemently denied. But that's where the good news of our text comes in. And it answers our question about to whom God entrusts God's mission in this world.

Who does God use to build the church and carry out God's mission? Well, God uses those who fail. I know, that just sounds wrong. It's illogical and clearly counter-cultural. But it is also undeniably biblical and true. God uses those who fail.

I had a student in one of my mentoring groups at Calvin seminary who told us his story of failure. This middle-age student had two masters' degrees and a PhD in the areas of IT and business. He and two friends started a small computer company together that promised huge financial gain. But it wasn't very long into the exploding success of the business that his partners managed to push him out the company leaving him not only jobless but with nothing to show for all his blood, sweat, and tears. In addition, being from a culture that highly values honor and saving face—he spiraled down into a dark pit of shame, despair, and hopelessness.

That is until, in a worship service his wife urged him to attend, Jesus called his name. In hearing the love and grace of God preached that morning, he heard Jesus addressing him. The failures of his past, he realized, could not keep God from finding, claiming, and using him. That's exactly what the Bible says over and over again. Peter's not the only one. There's Moses, who murdered a man. Noah, who got drunk and exposed himself. Jonah, who ran from God. Abraham, who lied twice about his wife being his sister, not to mention David's major moral failings, and many more. God loves and uses those who fail.

Secondly, to carry out God's purposes in this world, God uses the forgiven. I believe, one of the most gracious notes sounded in this story is Jesus' three questions to Peter, for it matches, and in a sense erases Peter's three denials. Three times Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to profess his love for his Lord—to say what Jesus knew was in Peter's heart. How gracious and kind! Notice Jesus says nothing of the betrayal. He speaks not one word of reprimand or rebuke. He doesn't ask for an apology or try to shame Peter. No. Jesus gives Peter the gift of grace, of a clean slate, of starting over, of trying again, the gift of a new day. Jesus restores Peter and freely forgives him. I hope you know that there is forgiveness for your deepest failures. There is forgiveness for the times you did not follow through with your convictions. There is forgiveness for the times you were afraid and denied your Lord. There is forgiveness for every sin, every short-coming, every failure. There is forgiveness for you. And like Peter, there is also the gracious invitation to engage in God's mission in the world.

Do you love me? Jesus asks the forgiven. Then feed my sheep. The excellent commentator Dale Brunner proposes that the best way to translate Jesus' instruction to Peter is something like this: "Take really good care of the ones I bring you." "Do you love me?" Jesus asks you, the forgiven. Then take really good care of the ones I bring you.

That caring takes shape in multitude of ways. I've seen God's grace awakened in you as well. I've seen it move you to serve, to pray, to knit, to lead, to teach, to give generously, to volunteer, to reach out to the stranger, the lonely, the suffering. Like a fresh spring shower, God's forgiving love has washed over you and it's moved you to engage in the only mission worth giving your life for. Who does God use for his life-renewing mission in this world? God uses those who fail and those who are forgiven. And while I don't often use alliterative points in my sermons, I do tonight—because God also uses those who follow, who follow Jesus wherever Jesus leads.

There's an article written by a journalist for the Winnipeg Free Press, who's been impacted by observing the ways Christians serve our world. He tells of the former CBC senior correspondent Brian Stewart, who, during his travels in some of the world's poorest and most conflicted countries, discovered that it's virtually impossible to go anyplace where Christians aren't busy helping people in need. The article quotes Stewart who says, "I've found there is no movement or force closer to the raw truth of war, famines, crises, and the vast human predicament than organized Christianity in action... And there is no alliance more determined and dogged in action than church workers, ordained and lay members, when mobilized for a common good... I've never reached a war zone," he said, "or a famine group, or crisis anywhere where some church organization was not there long before me—sturdy, remarkable souls usually too kind to ask: "What took you so long?"

Do you love me? Jesus asks you. And as his sometimes failing but always forgiven disciple—you must answer. And then wherever your mission field, in your own particular setting, your home, your school, your neighborhood, your workplace, your church—take really good care of the ones Jesus brings you. Remembering this: That the crucified, risen Jesus will lead you and be with you and equip you as you keep engaging God’s gracious, life-giving work in this world.

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