

God Leads from Failure to Life (Lent 5)
Jr 31:31-34, Ps 51:1-12, Heb 5:5-10, J 12:20-33
Shorter version

On a beautiful tropical beach occasionally the tide and the surf would be just right, and they would combine, and cause a lot of shellfish to be cast far up onto the beach. Some of these shellfish were very beautiful. After they were cast up on the beach, professional collectors and sellers would descend on the beach and swoop up all the shells to take them home to boil them and clean out all the flesh of the animals inside them and then sell the shells to tourists. Some of the shells were very valuable for they were very rare, and a lot of money could be made by a diligent collector.

One morning, after the moon and wind had been just right, many shellfish had been tossed up on the beach. A man was seen at the far end of the beach all by himself, picking up starfish one by one & throwing them back into the sea.

Curious about what he was doing with the starfish while so many other people were busy collecting the shellfish, someone went over and asked him if he collected things on the beach. "Only like this", he replied, "I collect only for the living." And throwing another starfish back into the sea he said, "See, one can help them."

He was asked how what he was doing could make a difference with all the collecting going on. As he threw another starfish back into the sea he said, "It made a difference to that one."

I think that this story has a lot to say to us about Jesus and about ourselves. In the midst of this world most people exploit things for their own personal benefit. They take every advantage to get ahead, to gain more than they already have. Given the right circumstances - people rush to pick up that which is unexpectedly & suddenly made available, ignoring, meanwhile, the suffering that is all around them in their hurry to look after themselves. We focus on building our retirement accounts, our resume's, our lives, our experiences and on and on and on.

But Jesus was a star thrower. He came to earth to move among us - who are like the dying starfish, longing for the ocean from which they have been tossed. Instead of taking what he could from that ocean, instead of seeking to enhance & enrich his own life, he paid attention to those who were in need. He collected for the living. He helped us instead of himself. He put himself between us and death.

In obedience to a higher law, a better value, a life giving attitude, Jesus came among us to rescue and reclaim lost souls, to set us free from the power of sin and death by returning us to the ocean of God's love, God's law and God's power. He followed through on God's repeated covenant promises.

Jesus came to restore wholeness to those who lay helpless and stranded upon the shore of life because either the tide & wind or circumstances of life had cast them there. Or, as is so often the case with us, but not so often in the case of starfish, because we have thoughtlessly and foolishly stranded ourselves on the shore.

Jesus renounced everything for the sake of bringing life to those around him: his family, his hometown, his people, his nation, and the whole wide world. He lay down his very life, so that others might live, so that others might know the blessings of God, so that others might be returned to the ocean of God's love.

Some might say - the cost of this is too high to expect of us, we are not Jesus. We do not have the special breaks that he had - being God's Son with an inside track on how to please God and how to follow God. It is true that we are not Jesus, but we are called to follow him, and to have his mind, his attitude within us. While it is true that Jesus had some special information, God has promised that very same information to us, if we would walk with Jesus as he walks with us. That's what the Bible is about, to show us and instruct us how to live as Jesus did. The Holy Spirit is to help us follow as Jesus did.

The power of Jesus, the love of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the joy and the sorrow of Jesus, and the life everlasting of Jesus, are all available to us - for the asking and the wanting. But we need to follow him. We need to be willing to walk as he walked, & die as he died. We need to grow in obedience to the Father. Not much sense for a starfish to get thrown back into the ocean and then die.

In our scripture from Hebrews we read, "During Jesus' life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. He was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered." Notice, Jesus felt pain. He cried. He prayed. He asked not to die. He struggled with his mission in life. But because he submitted and obeyed - he found life and brought abundant and eternal life to all the world. He allowed God to write his law on his heart and mind.

Jesus in our text from John says, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains but a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." We know seeds have to be put into the ground, receive nutrition and water and then sprout. Jesus said he was like a seed. He was a seed which did not stay lifeless in the bag, but which instead was put into the ground and changed, became a plant, thereby giving life to others. He sprouted, grew, came out of the grave and blesses us today.

This is part of the law of God - given in the new covenant; the law that is written upon our hearts, and which is fruitful in us, if we but allow ourselves to hear it and to heed it. Jesus is our example and we are invited to follow his mind and heart. That's our covenant today. Our scripture from Jeremiah tells us - God's law, God's design for us, written on our minds and hearts is a promise from God.

It's helpful for us today to reflect on these words from the prophet Jeremiah. He didn't have a lot of good news to share with the

people of Judah. They had failed to stay within God's hands. Despite God's love for them and his offering them covenants, they had walked away. They made other things their god - trust in military alliances, mistreated the widows, orphans & immigrants, wealth, trusted in false prophets - feel good happy messengers, trusted in their own wisdom and knowledge, and betrayed their best religious values. Jeremiah was led by God to preach doom. How's that for a job description? But that's what God asked him to do. Tell the truth. Their time was up. The invading army was coming to destroy their society and carry them off to another country.

But God through Jeremiah promised a new covenant - that's not on a piece of paper, but is inside people's minds and hearts. Everyone would know God so there would be no need for teachers who teach about God. Furthermore, wickedness is forgiven and sins will not be remembered at all!

The nation of Israel had failed. It was going in to exile. But still God was leading from failure to life. It wasn't going to be easy. But it was going to happen. God through Jeremiah said it was so. It's the same message we need to hear today. Our failures as individuals, as families, as congregations, as governments, as societies and in every realm of life - doesn't stop God.

But too often there is no sorrow like we read in Psalm 51. There is no movement from confession to apology, to telling others about God's love. And too often we are like those spoken of in the book of Hebrews. When we ought to be teachers of spiritual truth, we end up needing someone to teach us the elementary truth of God's word all over again. We need someone to draw our attention to that which is written within us, and is so apparent in the structure of our world - if we only have the eyes to see. We want that everyone will know God so we don't have to teach each other about God.

Jesus knew the law of God that states that the more we seek for ourselves, the more attached we become to the life we have. The more we

seek to avoid pain and suffering, the more we ignore the needs of others and seek instead to meet our own needs. The more wretched and sinful we become, the closer to death we are.

Jesus did not want the pain of the cross - he did not want death, he prayed to God that the cup would pass him by - as do we. We want out of tough economic times. We want health to be restored. We want government to work right. We want society to value the things of God. We want businesses to care about people.

We can imagine that Jesus felt bad when his family doubted him and his friends betrayed him. But even so Jesus was faithful to God's law of life. He knew that by caring for others, by putting the love of God and neighbor ahead of his own desires, that God would be glorified, that many who were lost would be found, and that he would be raised up - on a cross of suffering but then he would be in glory.

Because Jesus was faithful, God was glorified by those around Jesus - those who felt his care and his compassion. They praised God for what Jesus taught and did and for the love that he poured out, and they in turn gave back to him. Love given is love multiplied. Love only taken is love lost.

What profits a person if they gain the whole world, but lose their soul? There are so many around us today with lost souls and lost hopes. They cling desperately to hopes and dreams. They crave acceptance and love. They hope to find it by gaining power, wealth and influence, or by simply doing whatever anyone else asks, no matter how good or bad it may be for them, or for the one that has asked it of them.

Others drug themselves into a stupor to avoid the pain they feel - with legal and illegal drugs and adventures. They misuse the wonderful things God has given us for simple enjoyment or to conquer physical pain. They use them to deaden themselves to all feeling, for they don't like themselves, and they don't find joy.

There are many people who hold so tightly onto their lives in fear and anxiety, that they refuse to experience their lives in all the fullness that is available to them - in both the good times and the bad times. They are turned in on themselves and their own needs, rather than turned outward to the world.

But Jesus put the truth very strongly at times, those who love their lives will lose them, but those who hate their lives in this world will save them, and keep them unto eternal life. Jeremiah was saying the same thing to Judah. It's never too late to get right with God. He will turn your failures into life, abundant life.

This truth is meant to grab our attention. To remind us that we ourselves often stand in the way of what God has in mind for us to see and experience. It's a matter of perspective.

So often when walking in the forest
- all the lumberjack sees are trees that are ripe for harvesting,
- all the carpenter sees are the different kinds of wood for different kinds of furniture and buildings,
- all the hunter sees is the places in which animals might hide when the season is open,
- and all the farmer sees is fertile land that could benefit from clearing.

But the forest is a wondrous place: full of life, full of magic, full of beauty, full of God's presence for those who walk in it with eyes free to see it. It's not an accident life started in a Garden and creation was pronounced good!

What I am saying to us is simply this: What we really need in life cannot be grasped by us, it cannot be fashioned by our own desperate efforts, it cannot be taken by us from the shelf in the store. Rather it can only be received as a gift of God. It's a gift that comes to all those who give up trying to grasp it, trying to fashion it, trying to take it. It's a gift that comes to all who follow Jesus, and with him love God and those around them that God has entrusted to their care. It's a gift where Jesus looks for you

and me to throw us back into his ocean of love and mercy. It's a gift for people who fail - and desire life as Jesus lived it and taught it.

A song titled Spirit Song, says it well. Oh, let the Son of God enfold you, with His Spirit and His love, Let Him fill your heart and satisfy your soul. Oh, let Him have the things that hold you and his spirit like a dove, Will descend upon your life and make you whole.

Jesus, Oh, Jesus, Come and fill your lambs. 2x

Oh come and sing this song with gladness
As your hearts are filled with joy.
Lift your hands in sweet surrender to His name.
Oh, give Him all your tears and sadness,
Give Him all your years of pain,
And you'll enter into life in Jesus' name.

Jesus, Oh, Jesus, Come and fill your lambs. 2x

Please allow God to turn our failures into life.
I suspect each of us have a testimony or two to offer.