

“Winning Over Failure”
August 29, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

Went home the other weekend. My brother turned sixty and there was a party. His daughter, my niece, recently was married in a more private family wedding out in California. But she came east to show off her new husband. It was a combined affair. And gave me a chance to visit my father and mother.

Which I don't do often enough.

Dad opened up and it wasn't good.

My father, brother, and sisters are experiencing tough times at our family paint business with homeowners postponing hiring painting contractors, less construction these days.

My parents are at the finger-cramping age when they've had my sister Peggy replace the child proof caps on their medicine bottles. 11 bottles sit in the basket on the kitchen table, including their Lipitor, Digoxin, Folic Acid, Colchicine, Furosemide, Plavix, Allopurinol. They are puzzled by the disappearance (the looting?) of their affluence. Strident voices on TV assigning blame have become magnets to the needles of their apprehension and unspoken anger.

What went wrong with the economy? Why did their investments evaporate into the clouds only to rain into someone else's pocket? The ready cash in the wallet isn't there the way it used to be. It used to be Dad would show affection by chasing me around the lawn to stick a \$20 bill in my pocket – now he doesn't have \$20 in his.

We tried to console, as best we could. There is a mighty difference between failure due to your fault and errors and failure due to circumstances beyond your control. Sometimes you cause it. Sometimes the bird just poops on you.

But, so what? Both lead to the same result. They should be at the pinnacle, basking in the sunny rewards of decades of hard work, admiring around themselves the spectacular landscape of satisfying success. Instead, they sadly signify the shrinking of America's middle class.

If my cross-country trip has made me anything, it is profoundly depressed. Given what I've seen out on the road, our small town back -- whose economy is dependent upon our major hospital -- has it very good. For a small town, we are very fortunate. We are the exception. Dad won't admit it, but he is worried over whether they can float the business through winter.

It isn't fair.

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Yes, we've heard all the platitudes about failure. I even believe most of them.

How it is healthy to fail. For a football team or golf team, there's nothing worse than winning all the time. It becomes a curse and you actually can feel relieved when you finally lose a game.

How failure is the nursemaid to fame.

How if it doesn't kill you it makes you stronger.

Yet It isn't fair that at 85 years old my father – still working 10 hour days, 6 days a week, for 60 years -- shouldn't have to think of himself as a failure. Sixty years of blood and sweat have gone into the business.

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It isn't fair. You can get cynical.

You may be familiar with Murphy's Law: anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.

Well, there's a follow-up to Murphy's Law called Flanagan's Principle:

Murphy's Law says anything that can go wrong, will.

Flanagan's Principle adds: Murphy was an optimist.

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Take a look around here. We've had a taste of it. Grove isn't where I thought it would be. There is enough failure to go around.

Take for instance our 'Back to School Fun Night' the other Wednesday. Lots of food – hot dogs and ice cream – and a magician to perform magic tricks. Emma tossing the coin into the magical bag.

Five kids.

It was disappointing. No blame here. We're missing something. We need to read the congregation better.

Learning a lot from disappointment these days. Part of the reason for this whole change thing around here.

The reality is that doing nothing is a change of a kind, being stagnant is change of a bad kind. I'd rather choose the kind of change while we can. Changing for the better is wisest while you are in good shape and can.

I am trying to change. I've gotten lazy. I've been in my successful rut. Realizing this is downright uncomfortable. Reinventing myself is going to be uncomfortable. This is hard trying to learn how I need to improve.

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If I was disappointed in some of the turn out we've had for good things, can you imagine Jesus' disappointment and his disciples when they get rebuffed

What if you give a party and no one comes?

We were just offering hot dogs and a magic show.

Jesus is offering cure from leprosy, the dead raised, demons cast out, the sick cured. Jesus is offering eternity and the kingdom of heaven.

Often we focus in this Bible passage on the ones who refuse to listen, who refuse to welcome Jesus' friends into their homes. Imagine what they missed out on.

But let's instead take a look at it from the perspective of these Twelve dustees. The dustees rather than the dusted.

It was Jewish practice to remove their sandals and shake off the dust, dirt, and grime after they had walked through Gentile land and before re-entering the Holy Land of Israel. A gesture saying: "Let's rid ourselves of their uncleanness."

Here Jesus sends out his disciples to the lost sheep of Israel. To their own people, that is. Those who should have been the most receptive.

It also is a great way to test the disciples themselves, whether truly committed or easily discouraged.

O for a faith that will not shrink

Those who should have been the most receptive weren't. They must have been too comfortable to admit their need. Too secure to admit their own failings. Too secure to risk the change. To get out of the rut and be open to something new.

Matthew leaves it mysterious whether they traveled solo or in groups. Odds are in groups though. That's how they traveled on other occasions. And to go humble and dependent -
- no gold, silver, copper no bag for journey, one tunic, no sandals or staff

Imagine the dustees sadness born from that sense of failure and frustration. How could I have reached them better? I have to respect their choice, but what could we have done better?

You feel responsible. That's okay. Jesus wants us to feel responsible.

Which is why Jesus warns them in advance. For some, you're going to fail.

Which is why Jesus warns them in advance: you can't own their decision. Nor can you let them blame you for their mistake.

You can only learn from it and move on.

You have to be satisfied in your own skin that you did you best, regardless the result.