

John 6:25-35

The Most Important Thing

Game 6. There are people who know already what I am talking about. In the 6th game of the 1986 World Series, in the bottom of the ninth inning, with 2 outs, the 1st baseman from the Boston Red Sox let an easy groundball roll right between his legs, and the tying run scored from second base. Later, the New York Mets scored the winning run, and the next night won game 7 and the World Championship. And Boston was frustrated once again; they had not won since 1918, and would not win until 2004.

My focus is upon that 1st baseman who made the error. I won't name him because he has suffered enough. He had a long career in the big leagues, a fine player, but he will always be remembered for that one misplay. And he makes me ask, "How do you go on after failure in the most important moment in your life?"

Now, I hope you won't think I am picking on that player. There are many failures out there. Perhaps you remember the TV show "Wide World of Sports" with the legendary phrase that opened each episode, "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." And maybe you can recall, as I do, how, during the course of a sporting event, we would see the close-up pictures and learn the backgrounds of so many athletes who competed, the winners, but also the many who fell short. That

particular sports show was so good about presenting the men and women “up close and personal,” and the viewers came to know the struggles of the athletes, the years and years of training and trying, came to care about them, only to see them so often fail. Can we ever really understand how or why failure occurs, even after so much preparation? Bad luck, some might say, or bad timing, or an emotional lapse, as the pressure of the game or the race wore them down; yes, what agony to lose their composure in their most important moment!

There is Antonio Salieri, the 18th century composer, prominent and successful, probably as contented as could be, until a young fellow by the name of Wolfgang Mozart moved into town, and Salieri realized he could never attain to the almost divine brilliance of Mozart’s compositions. And if the stories are true, Salieri despaired and grew vengeful. He must have seen himself as a failure at his life’s work, because he could not measure up to Mozart’s genius. Sometimes the other person is simply more talented, even at the thing most important to us.

We could go on and on. Mighty men of myth who failed because of one great moral flaw, and characters in scripture, like King Saul; legends and novels and the history books are full of human failure. Think of Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg in 1863, where General George Pickett led his soldiers on a futile

attempt to overrun the heavily fortified Union lines at perhaps the turning point of the War. How do you go on after failure at the most important thing in your life? Pickett barely did go on, he dealt with the bitterness of this event the remainder of his life, and frustration at the failure of the strategy and anger at the immense loss of life.

How do you continue after failure? Isn't that a question for all of us? Is there a word of grace for those of us who failed at the most important thing in our lives? Like in our relationships, as a failed husband or wife, or parent or friend? How do you pick yourself up and start over after your livelihood crashes, after hard work and worry and debt? Like the rancher in Elmer Kelton's great novel, *The Time It Never Rained*, who thought he was finally going to make it after years of drought and plunging cattle prices, only to see his last hope, the herd of goats he had raised to replace the cattle, die in a freak winter storm before he can bring them into the shelter of his barns. When the seasons and the skies are against you, as well as your own limited skill or moral weakness, failure is a certainty, and where do you go from there?

And we can also fail in the religious or spiritual realm. Maybe we want to ask, like the crowd of failures following Jesus around Galilee, "What must we do

to be doing the works of God”? You couldn’t fail doing that, right? They are only asking to be successful enough to be able to eat regularly, but even in this they fail ; they misunderstand him and ask wrongly. Jesus response is almost a non sequitur, for it doesn’t answer their question, but an entirely different one.

The crowd has followed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee because the previous day, he miraculously fed them with only five loaves and 2 fish, and our passage today is a series of mundane questions by the crowd and the answers of Jesus which are his attempts to bring them into a deeper realization of God working even in their failed lives. Jesus offers up spiritual answers to their banal questions until finally he says, “My Father gives you the true bread from heaven,” meaning himself of course, and we see this great work of God, that can fill up empty hearts and give life, where before was only failure and death. But the crowd can only say, “Lord, give us this bread always,” as though with greedy, grasping hands- hands that should be folded in grateful prayer; and we know they will only forever be failures. Here is the very most important thing- relationship with God and eternal life- and they want a sandwich!

We can’t blame them too much; hunger must be hard. We shouldn’t judge them too harshly, we may wind up judging ourselves, and all the other desperate

and hungry people. The poor, the failures of the world have always wondered, “what works must we do to do God’s work”? in the context, of asking what they must do to get this bread. Jesus’ answer shows us that this daily bread is a secondary concern.

We must go back to verse 29, to Jesus’ words, “this is the work of God, that you believe in the One he has sent.” We see immediately that Jesus turns the question around, from our work to God’s work, from works (plural) to this one work: belief, which is of course not a work at all, so that we see nothing is our own accomplishment. The most important thing in the world, and it is nothing that we do. In fact, we may understand better what is at stake in this passage if we read it a bit more literally from the Greek: this is the work of God, *so that* you might believe in the One he has sent. *The purpose of all God’s works* in all the ages of his dealing with his creation and his creatures come down to this one work: to bring us to faith in the Messiah who has come down from heaven. What a powerful word of possibility and hope for all of us who have tried and failed, and tried and failed, to know that God in Jesus Christ has done this great deed to bring us to himself, and gives us comfort and wholeness and life. He does not give us

bread just for today, but meaning and strength to continue despite the guilt and the pain and the loss that we all know in our failures.

It was said that when the Messiah came, he would give manna, like Moses in the wilderness. And the background of our passage is this miracle, the feeding of the 5,000. But from Jesus' words in this scripture, we understand him to be a different kind of Messiah from what they expected (and maybe, different from what we expect!): not a commander to lead us into victory, or even an administrator who hands out food and gifts, but the Son of God, who has come to be with us, and to call us to believe and trust in God. Here is the word of grace we long to hear in the times of despair and regret: I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.

John 6 is a Eucharistic passage. The author's intent is to describe what happens as believers partake of the Lord's Supper. At the table, we come to understand what Jesus does and what he is; he provides this bread that we eat- he makes a miracle with this loaf that we may all be filled as we share it together; and for all who believe, he *is* this bread of life that fills and sustains broken hearts and lives. Here is the most important thing we do as church; and even if we come here as failed

humans (and we do!), our Lord feeds us with boundless grace and with life that never ends.

My intent today has not been to make us think badly about ourselves or to feel depressed about our failures, but to realize that the world is what it is, and that there are opponents and competitors out there who are smarter and better prepared; that there are times when we will lose battles, and times we will lose people precious to us.

Jesus is not the Lord who will lift us up above defeat, rather he is the bread of heaven that has come down to fill up our emptiness and to be with us right in the middle of our failure.

In our little book of Lenten devotions, Henri Nouwen has written, “Lord Jesus, it seems at times I am standing on one side of a great canyon, and see how I should grow toward you, and live in your presence and serve you, but I cannot reach the other side where you are. O Lord, can I get there, or am I doomed to die on the wrong side of the abyss? You alone, Lord, can reach out to me and save me.”

This is the story of our scripture. We can only fail if we try to do the works of God so that we may reach him, but Jesus, the bread of life, has come across the canyon and has reached us. And even at our lowest point, and in our worst failures, that is the good news above all other news. We lose so much in this life, but our Lord does not lose us.