

Dealing with Disappointment

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-12 AND MARK 4:35-41

2 OCTOBER 2011, WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

AT WILLIAMSVILLE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, WILLIAMSVILLE, NEW YORK

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Cor. 4:7)

EVERY DAY OFFERS THE OPPORTUNITY FOR A FRESH START IN LIFE. “The unfailing love of the Lord never ends,” the author of Lamentations wrote; “[God’s] mercies begin afresh each day” (Lam. 3:22-23). And St. Paul assured us that whenever anyone is in Christ, everything old passes away, and everything becomes new (2 Cor. 5:17). In Christ, every moment is an opportunity to make a fresh start in life.

But fresh starts occasionally lead to dead ends, failures, and disappointments. Disappointment is an unavoidable fact of life. If you are not being disappointed, not making mistakes, you’re not living, not growing. Disappointment has something to teach us, and every dead end, failure, or disappointment is an opportunity for something new. Not every fresh start ends in disappointment, but every disappointment is an opportunity for a fresh start.

Disappointment is our experience when something or someone fails to meet our expectation or hope. One of the blessings it brings is that it reminds us of our human nature. We are creatures, we’re not the Creator, and as creatures we need to remember some things.

First, we are going to disappoint ourselves. We are fallible creatures, and it’s in our human nature to make mistakes, bad choices, errors in judgment. We’re going to fail to measure up to our ideals and our goals for ourselves. Even St. Paul had that experience. “What I don’t understand about myself,” he wrote, “is that I decide one way, but then I act in another, doing things I absolutely despise, . . . sabotaging my best intentions” (Rom. 7:15-20 *The Message*). It’s a fact of life that we’re going to disappoint ourselves.

Second, other people, even people of power and influence who ought to be able to deliver what they promise, will disappoint us. “Do not put your trust in princes,” the psalmist warned, “in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish” (Ps. 146:3-4). Even respected and well-placed people are creatures and will eventually reach their limit and fail. Everyone in whom we trust will eventually disappoint us.

Third, when disappointment and failure leave us confused and lost, God’s guidance will take over. “I will lead the blind on their journey,” God promised, “by paths unknown I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places will become level ground, . . . and I will not forsake them” (Isa. 42:16). When all else fails, God still is God, and God will not fail us.

With all of that as background, here are some things I’m learning about disappointment in life. One of the things I’m learning is that disappointment and failure are welcome mats at the door of creativity.

Thomas Edison was disappointed more than 3,000 times in his search for a dependable filament for the electric light bulb. "Every failure," he wrote, "told me something that I was able to incorporate into the next attempt." Every disappointment we experience has something to teach us about starting fresh.

I'm also learning that when conditions seem darkest and fear seems greatest, opportunity can also be greatest. Edison established General Electric in 1876 – in the middle of a six-year-long recession. Today GE is the third largest company in the world. One hundred years after Edison founded GE, during the recession of 1975, Bill Gates and Paul Allen founded Microsoft. Of the thirty companies that make up the Dow Jones Industrial Average, just over half (sixteen) were started during a recession or depression. You might recognize some of them: Procter & Gamble, Disney, Alcoa, McDonald's, and Johnson & Johnson.

Another important lesson I'm taking to heart is that in the midst of the chaos and fear that often surround failure and disappointment, the best thing to do may be nothing at all. Go to sleep! But aren't we supposed to be always alert and ready, like a householder guarding against a thief in the night (Matt: 25:43)? Yet in today's gospel reading, with the storm and threat of disaster breaking around him and his friends, Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat (Mark 4:37-38)!

Our word "sleep" comes from the German word *schlaff*, meaning "loose." To go to sleep is literally to "hang loose." It's to let go and let God have control of our lives – which God always has anyway, whether we allow it or not. The situation looked like disaster, but Jesus knew who was in control, and as Atticus Finch often said to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he knew "It's not time to worry yet." Jesus was confident enough in God to "hang loose" through the chaos and wait for the right time, knowing as the psalmist did that "God pours gifts upon his beloved while they sleep" (Ps. 127:7).

The last lesson about dealing with disappointment that I want to mention – and this is taking me a lifetime to appreciate – is one that St. Paul also learned late in his life, that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). As Eugene Peterson paraphrased it in *The Message*, "every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good," even disappointment and failure.

If even death will not have the last word, if Christ holds the keys that unlock the gates of hell itself and is "making all things new" (Rev. 1:18; 21:5), then surely our disappointments and failures will not be the end of our story. There is more to come. Seventeenth-century poet Francis Quarles offered sound advice when he wrote, "Judge not the play before the play is done: / Her plot has many changes; every day / Speaks a new scene; the last act crowns the play."¹

When you have to deal with disappointment, as you surely will, welcome it as an opportunity to make a creative, fresh start in life; consider it an invitation to "hang loose," to let go of your plan and give God's plan a chance to have its way; and don't judge anything until you get to the final act of life's play, when you'll be able to see how everything works together for good in the love of God.

PRAYER — God of new birth: When we are disappointed and our lives have no music in them, when our hearts have lost courage and darkness hides our horizon, give us the grace of patience to wait upon you. Help us to surrender our limited time into the eternal rhythm of your seasons, that in our weakness we may know your strength.