

September 17, 2023 Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

First Corinthians 1:18-25

"Resilience: Every Setback Offers a Transformation"

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Now what? Her GPA was amazing. She had worked so hard for so long. She had spent years dreaming of going to grad school in Boston. And there on the computer screen was not the acceptance letter she expected. But a rejection. Now what? It was just a routine annual check-up. He went through the motions without much thought. Until the doctor called back with blood results revealing diabetes. Now what? We lay out plans for our life, assuming how everything will play out for ourselves. And then something comes along that flips the script.

Today is the second in a series on the Biblical case for resiliency. The four traits of resiliency we are considering are as follows, number one, practice mindfulness; number two, every setback offers a transformation; number three, find humor in everything; number four, understanding we cannot control our lives.

Today we will consider the second trait of resiliency, responding to setbacks, and recognizing the potential for transformation. In our New Testament text this morning we hear Paul writing to the Church in Corinth about the very apex of setback, the epitome of failure, the crucifixion of God in Jesus Christ. I need to be entirely clear that I am in no way suggesting that Christ crucified is some parallel setback to not getting the promotion for which we were hoping or whatever we may deem a setback in our lives.

But the radical truth that God has led us to redemption through God's very son, broken and crucified on the cross is a potent message about how God is at work in the world. It is a stark and vivid symbol that overturns the expectations of the world about exactly what is ultimate power; about how victory is achieved. The wisdom of the world looks at power as strength over others; as a question of leverage, as the one who never loses. In recent parlance, power means being too big to fail.

So when it is time for God to come along and transform the world it was certainly reasonable to expect that we would be on the receiving end of something that was literally larger than life. Instead, we were given a single man, the son of a two-bit carpenter from a backwater town. This man wandered around with a small band of followers, told stories, healed a few people, and was executed because he made those with worldly power nervous.

And somehow though this tiny story ending in death the greatest victory ever won occurred. He who was dead is now risen. And not just him, but all of us, for all time. Death itself is defeated. And not just death but everything that has ever or could ever separate us from the love of God.

If that is what ultimate power looks like it has a lot to teach us about power on every level. And even more to teach us about what the journey to victory looks like; about what setbacks and failure can mean to us.

No matter how pretty we are able to dress ourselves up before we walk out the door each day, each of us is very mortal, very limited, and very prone to error. And each of us would like the world to see us as successful and we would like to see ourselves as successful. This creates a rather potent potential

juxtaposition, a very likely chance of tonal dissonance in our lives. To protect our façade of success we often seek to deny that we have failed in any way, like a kid on the playground who trips and falls and then announces to all around that he meant to do that. Or even worse, we seek to insulate ourselves from failure by never trying anything of significant risk and thus hope to avoid the opportunity for failure.

But being human, being mortal comes with a guarantee of failure. There is no question about that. And not only that, being mortal means that we are vulnerable to the random vicissitudes of physical existence, illness, accidents, all sorts of things may land upon us at any time and upend our lives. When it comes to the failures that belong to us the questions that arise are two. At what kind of efforts we will choose to fail? And, what will we do in response to our failures?

Jesus' death, his foolishness, his apparent failure, his journey that led to the cross was driven by his unshakeable commitment to reconciling humanity and God regardless of the consequences. Most of our efforts in this world, most of what we will try and fail at will not be so singularly noble. But when we do indeed fail at something, whatever it may be, it is worth pondering if it was something indeed worth attempting to achieve and risk failing in the first place. Sometimes we fail at something and in hindsight can recognize that the goal was not as important as we once thought. The world did not end because we were not named a partner in our firm before we turned thirty-five.

What Jesus chose to apparently fail at was singularly world-changing. But for us, sometimes failure teaches us that

the goal itself was not as important as we thought; not as important as raising our children well; or committing our time to charitable causes. Failure can bring us wisdom about what is to be most valued in our lives. Failure can also allow us to learn how we might approach the same problem differently. Now that we know what does not work we can be open to trying something new that possibly might work. We can try again with an informed perspective.

But what failure, what setbacks most importantly can do is remind us about something essential about ourselves. It teaches us who we are not. We are not perfect. We are not God. Both our failures and those random events beyond our control like illness and accidents remind us that we are in need of God. We are in need of someone who loves us enough to die on the cross for us. The wisdom of the world would teach us that we can be self-sufficient. The foolishness of the cross teaches us that each and every time we fail in being the perfect, self-sufficient people we strive to be, God's all powerful, stop-at absolutely-nothing love will be there to catch us. God's love was powerful enough to transform death into eternal life; to transform a torturous cross into potent sign of hope for us all; to transform our broken actions of killing the one who came to save us into a pathway to forgiveness for all humanity. There is absolutely nothing God cannot transform.

There is no greater source of resiliency in the entire world than knowing that when we make a mess of things, or life just becomes messy all on its own, we are deeply loved; deeply loved enough to be forgiven; deeply loved enough to be made new; deeply loved enough to try again; deeply loved enough to persevere.

So go out into the world today and fail. I am sure we all will. Each day contains its own variety of mistakes you and I will make. And each day contains the possibility that our mortal frailty will be revealed to us through no fault of our own. Let us recognize each and every setback as an opportunity to be reminded that, thank goodness, it is not our job to be perfect, to be God. We get to be the ones loved and transformed by God. Every "Now what" moment in our lives comes with the divine beside us, leading us forward to what is next.

Thanks be to God. Amen.