

“Success in the Midst of Failure”

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Bible Texts: Gospel of Luke 22:31-32

Eternal Heavenly God, we come this day thanking You for yet another chance to be fed by You. Please shape us to Your desire. Let the spoken words be pleasing and acceptable to You to the end that You are glorified. In the blessed name of Jesus, Amen.

This morning, as we consider Jesus, who suffered (in an eternal sense) on our behalf, we will focus on two passages of Scripture. The first Scripture, which is the primary text, is found in Luke. This is what it states: *“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, (32) but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers and sisters.”* The second text, is 2 Corinthians, Chapter 7:10: *“For godly grief (sorrow/ pain) produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death,”* (NRSV). This morning, I will be reflecting on the word of God with this theme in mind: *Success in the Midst of Failure.*

When everything seemed so wrong, that is just the moment when God made everything all right. This particular passage in the Gospel of

Luke records such a moment. This passage is all about a moment in time when everything would seem all wrong. Jesus was the long awaited, much anticipated Messiah. The ancients had foretold his arrival centuries before his birth in Bethlehem. The books of the Prophets told the people that He would come and that He would suffer, and yet, when the moment arrived, none of those who believed him to be the Messiah really wanted him to suffer.

I suppose that they were somewhat like us. One reason why we hate to see others suffering is because we know that we ourselves are not immune to such a reality. Each life is constantly in motion – at one end the pendulum there is great joy, pleasure; at the other end, there is great pain, suffering, even agony. So, those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah could only take a little bit of what that meant. They would not digest all of what that meant as is true for you and for me. You cannot digest all of what your existence will entail right at this moment. You cannot digest all of the joys to come your way nor are you in a position to digest all of the sorrows to come your way, but both must surely come.

Here, in Luke, this mostly certainly was true for Simon, also known as Simon Peter or most commonly as just “Peter.” He was not quite ready yet to digest what was to come. Peter had walked with Jesus. He had been right there to see miracle after miracle happen at just the slightest

touch of Jesus' hand. He had witnessed as Jesus healed the sick, as Jesus cured the blind. Why Jesus had even cured Peter's own mother-in-law from an illness (Matt.8:14). This disciple, Peter, had been present throughout the entire ministry, and yet, he did not want to believe that Jesus would suffer. Today, as we reflect on Jesus, we will do so with Peter at the forefront and ourselves, our own struggles – both individual and collective – in the background.

Let us take another look at Luke 22:31-32. I would like you to pay close attention to that last verse, particularly the punctuation mark which separates the last two clauses. In most translations, I believe you will find a semicolon. This is a very important marker for us today because it is the place – that space after the semicolon and the next phrase – it is the place where we will base our reflection on Peter today. You see, in that space, that space after the semicolon and the next phrase – in that space we find failure.

This is where we find Peter's failure. Here, in this space, we find the one who did not hold up. Here, in this space, we find the one who messed up. But then, in that very same verse, we find a renewed, restored Peter. At the beginning of the verse, we find someone who is on his way to failure, but then by the end of the verse, we find someone who had returned to the one who could make everything all right. What does Jesus tell Peter at

V. 32? He tells Peter, *“But I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back (some translations read “returned to me” strengthen your brothers.”* In other words, Peter, once you’ve failed, and you’ve acknowledged your failure, come back to me. When you’ve failed, come back to me. When you’ve deserted me Peter, come back to me, and then I’ll use you to strengthen your brothers.

Peter isn’t the only one in history to have deserted Jesus. Some right here today have deserted Jesus. You’ve turned away, but unlike Peter, you have not returned and yet Jesus waits. Isn’t it interesting that this message to Peter – this message to strengthen the brothers and sisters – happens here? Consider where we are in the story of Jesus’ life.

He is no longer the tiny, helpless baby in the manger. Mary and Joseph had long ago presented him in the temple in Jerusalem to a man named Symeon, who told Mary even then that (Luke 2:34) *“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed.”* There, in the temple at that same time, was a prophet named Anna, also saw the child (Luke 2: 36-38). She praised God upon seeing him and she began to preach about the child to all who would hear. Jesus himself had long ago sat with the chief elders and leaders in the temple. Jesus had long since told Mary that he must “be about his Father’s business.”

By the time we arrive at this scene in Luke 22, Jesus had been causing trouble for a long time. He had already made it clear that he had no interest whatsoever in maintaining the status quo. He had no interest in those who had everything and absolutely every interest in those who had nothing. By this time, he had already made it clear that he had absolutely no interest in those who possessed the finer things of life - those with the best garments, the best homes, the best of everything. The best seats in the synagogues, the best education money could buy. No, Jesus had made it clear that there were others – some people on the other side of the tracks - on his mind. He wanted to talk with women, he wanted to create a new center – a place where those who once stood on the fringes of society now marked a new beginning. Jesus wanted to see those people at the center of this new way.

Jesus, by this point, had made it clear that He wanted to make visible those who had been rendered invisible. Jesus, by this point, had made it clear that the old rule was out and the new rule began with something to the tune of *“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”* Or, *“sell all that you have and follow me”* (Luke 18:22). Jesus wanted to make it clear that a new day had begun. So, where we are in Luke today, as I have thought about it, Peter – the student with the great teacher – is about

to come face-to-face with all that which Jesus had taught. Every lesson, every healing, every moment of time together in prayer, all of those experiences are about to come to a fork in the road. Peter doesn't even know which way he'll go. He does not know that he's about to fail. But Jesus tells him: *"And you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."*

Failure is a peculiar thing. There will be times when others will fail you. This happens to individuals and whole communities of people. Those of us who are the descendants of the earliest Africans in the Americas are the descendants of people who were failed by other human beings, many of whom carried a book just like this one. We know the legacy. We know what happened to them once forced enslavement of men, women, and children was no longer legal. We know about the promises made and the promises broken. We know about the years of legalized segregation and still today, we know all too well, this condition – seemingly permanent – of racism. So, we know all too well what it means to have been failed by others.

But, as I said, failure is a peculiar thing. Yes, there will be times when others will fail you, but there is this other component to failure: We can and will fail ourselves. At times, this self-inflicted type of failure can be subtle, difficult to detect; at other times it will be quite apparent. Do you realize

that each time God places an idea in your heart and you sit on it, long after the Lord has made it clear to you that that idea came from God to you for God's purposes, you fail yourself? You fail yourself and your God. This can become a way a life. You can refuse to act at God's command and before you know it, you are no longer hearing from the Lord. You are cut off. You are alive, but you are cut off. At times, you can go along thinking that you are hearing from God, but that is not true. You are alive, but you are not being directed by God. But God says that's not necessary. God knows you.

God knew that Peter would fail and God knew that you would fail, too. God knew that you would be left, at times, disappointed by friends and family, disappointed by jobs and schools, and yes, at times, disappointed by the household of faith. God knew that some of those sitting inside the houses of God would leave those on the outside disappointed. God knew that some of us would not be true to the calling to make a difference in the world for the name of Christ. God knew that some would heed his word. But God is patient. Remember what Jesus told Peter, *"When you come back to me, strengthen the others."* In other words, once you recognize your failure – whether it is all yours or inflicted upon you by others – once you have failed, do not quit. Come back to me! If you will come back to God, God will dry your eyes. God will mend your

broken heart. If God had the power to raise Jesus from the dead, then God certainly has the power to heal you? If you will come back, God will do the rest. If you will come back, then you will see that it really is possible to have success in the midst of failure.

If you will come back to Him, Jesus will help you to stand tall when others want to see you down and out. Jesus gives you joy in the midst of failure, but on the way to success. Jesus gives you peace in the midst of failure, but on the way to success. You may be in the midst of failure right now, but with Christ you can be on your way to success at the same time. On the one hand, there may be failure; on the other hand, there is success. Why? Because Christ stands in the midst to mediate the two.

Jesus told Peter, when you return, then strengthen the others. Peter had to come back. Peter could not be of any use to the others until he returned to Christ. And, I am here to tell you today, you must turn back to the Living Savior. You may be sitting here – and perhaps you've been here Sunday after Sunday – but you can be here each Sunday and still stand so far away from the Lord. You've got to move yourself into the direction of the Living Savior. You can't be an ice princess and be in harmony with the Living Savior. No, it's just not possible. Harmony with the Living Savior requires a demonstration of His love – at all times. It is not contextual. To

be in harmony with the Living Savior means your unconditional love for all of humankind.

It is not until Peter has failed, or is about to fail, that Jesus tells him, “When you return, strengthen the others.” When you fail me Peter, that’s when I’ll use you. When you fail, even with all of your great intentions, I will take you back. I will love you and you will love me. Then, you will be able to strengthen the others.

Is God calling you back today? The Lord can still turn what may seem like a failure in your life into success. God can take the lies of the world – the lies of institutions, school systems, prison systems, governmental systems, church systems - and turn those failures into success stories.

All you have to do is to call out to God. God will answer. God loves you. God wants you to return to Him and when you have returned to God – turn to God with Godly repentance, you will see what God will do for you. God will use you. God will grant you success in the midst of failure. Remember, in that space, that space after the semicolon and the next phrase – in that space we find failure. This is where we find Peter’s failure and his success. We find success right in the midst of failure. But you cannot have lasting success without repentance. You cannot. You must go before the Lord with a heart that is ready to be made whole. You must go

to God with a heart that is yielded. You must go to God with a heart that wants to do what the Lord wants. Not your will, but God's will. Not what I want, but what God wants. What the Lord wants. Godly repentance. If you're not sure of what that is, ask the Lord and God will show you.

The Lord Jesus Christ came so that none would perish – but that all should have everlasting life. Don't perish. Even while you're here, it is possible for you to perish right here on earth. But God invites all of us to never stop returning. Right now, in your heart, you can return back to the Lord and God will show you the way back. None should perish. On earth, there is work for each of us, but that work will go unfinished if you do not return to the Lord. But do not allow past failures to stop you.

Do not allow disappointments to stop you. You must keep going and you must return to the Lord. The Living Savior has a wonderful plan for your life. There is no reason why you cannot begin to live out that plan right now. But you must return. When you do return, strengthen your brothers and sisters. Amen.