

## Dealing with Disappointments

Todd R. Long

Lectionary Readings: *Exodus* 3:1-15; *Psalms* 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; *Romans* 12:9-21;  
*Matthew* 16:21-28

Today's sermon is for anybody who has disappointments, interruptions, failures, and setbacks. Would that be anybody here, I wonder? Today's sermon is for all of you who are doing your work in the world, trying to serve others, using your gifts and talents, but you're just not seeing the *results* you expected or hoped for. Maybe something you tried depended on other people, but they let you down; you put yourself out there but others criticized you; or something in life got in the way: a family member became ill and you had to care for them; you had a great idea for housing the homeless or solving a traffic problem, but nobody else appreciated it; you started a non-profit to make your community better but too few people showed up to help; you interviewed for a job, or you auditioned for something, but the decision makers rejected you.

*Everyone* has disappointments in life. Everyone has plans that get derailed. That's because each of us is engaged in making a life alongside 8 billion other people, each of whom has personal desires and goals and dreams. Conflicts are bound to happen.

These facts motivate difficult questions. One is this: What should we strive to achieve as we're carving out our lives in our complex social context? What should we commit ourselves to? And which principles can we rely on?

A couple of weeks ago, you may recall, Father Rob Keim spoke about letting love guide our actions.<sup>1</sup> This is excellent advice for Christians, because Jesus said that the entire law and prophets depend on two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and reason, and love your neighbor as yourself (see *Matthew* 22:37-40).

How we love God and neighbor will vary from person to person. This is because we have various personalities, histories, genetics, talents, skills, and desires. As Christians, each of us should reflect well on how we should best love

---

<sup>1</sup> Keim, Rob, "A Church of Change", St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church, Arroyo Grande, California, August 20, 2023. <https://saintbarnabas-ag.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Homily-A-Church-of-Change.pdf>

God and neighbor. This is a complex and difficult topic. But today I want to say a few words to those of you who already *know* how you are suited to love God and neighbor. You already have a sense of your skills and talents and you've had thoughts about how to use them. How do you deal with setbacks, disappointments, and interruptions that thwart your efforts to do good in the world?

One thing we need to appreciate is that *everyone* has setbacks, disappointments, and rejections. It's easy to look at famous, successful people and to think they had it easy. But, this is a fantasy. The vast majority of successful people became successful because they stuck it out when others gave up.<sup>2</sup> Do you know, for example, that the vast majority of successful artists suffer through many rejections before their work is accepted? Madeline L'Engle's Newberry Medal winning book *A Wrinkle in Time* was rejected by publishers 26 times; Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* was rejected 38 times; Robert Persig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was rejected a staggering 121 times.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of writers and other artists have to go through many "nos" before anyone says "yes" to their work.

Nobody just sails through life on easy, fortunate winds; and no one hits it out of the park every time. My favorite baseball player of all time is Hank Aaron. He could do it all: hit for power, run, steal bases, field.<sup>4</sup> He was truly great. But, Hammerin' Hank had to work his way up from poverty and he endured many instances of racism. In his first year of youth baseball he committed 42 fielding errors and they made him feel so bad that he almost quit playing baseball. But he persisted and ended up as arguably the greatest baseball player of all time.

My point here is that even the greatest achievers have to work through disappointments and failures. Is there something near and dear to you, some project or idea that you gave up on because you encountered failure or rejection early on? Maybe you need to try again. Failure, rejection, and disappointment

---

<sup>2</sup> Of course, merely not giving up on something worthwhile is rarely sufficient to achieve it; the point here is that among equals with respect to skill, successful people are usually the ones who kept at it, whatever it is, longer than their unsuccessful equals.

<sup>3</sup> In my own field, it is thought that less than 10% of essays submitted by philosophers are accepted for publication in philosophy journals.

<sup>4</sup> Henry "Hank" Aaron finished his major league baseball career with 2,174 runs, 3,771 hits, 2,297 runs batted in, 755 home runs, 240 stolen bases, a .555 slugging percentage, and a .982 fielding percentage.

come with the territory. That's just the way it goes for people who are carving out a life.

If you really believe in a project; if it's something good you know you know you can contribute to the world, my advice is: don't give it up. When you can, get back up on that horse and try to ride again. Success might be around the next corner. Here's the thing about achievements: opportunities for success arise only for people who are putting themselves out there and doing stuff. The world is full of people who are sitting on their hands, criticizing other people from afar, thinking they could do it better, waiting to be discovered. But, if you don't try, if you don't put yourself out there, you can be sure it's not going to happen (whatever *it* is).

Another possibility is that, even though you try and try again, your idea or your project doesn't get accepted, or taken up, or recognized, or respected. Many people we now revere for their great accomplishments were rejected or unrecognized during their lifetimes. The great Vincent van Gogh sold only one painting while he was alive. Emily Dickinson had only a few poems published before her death (and historians think she was probably unaware of their being published). The great composer Johann Sebastian Bach was not recognized as a music composer until after his death.<sup>5</sup> During the lifetime of Claude Monet, critics derided his paintings as formless and ugly.

So it might be for you. Your plan for feeding the homeless in your community might not get traction; your idea about how to entice young people into the church might get rejected by the vestry; you organize a public event to teach people something important and only two people show up; you keep running for public office on sound principles but populist candidates with terrible ideas keep beating you. When you feel the sting of repeated rejections or failures, sometimes the best thing is to try again. Sometimes we need to learn from our mistakes and do it better next time.

But, even when you do your best at trying again, it may be that your wonderful idea or project *never* gets off the ground. It's easy to lose confidence and hope. How do we deal with repeated rejection or disappointment? Today I want to say this: as Christians we have something that many people lack, and that is a way to work through the pain and suffering of rejection and disappointment that gives meaning to all the love-directed projects we undertake.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bach *was* renowned during his lifetime as an organist.

Here's the key idea: as Christians we are not called to produce what people normally think of as *results*. We are not called to become famous or recognized for our achievements. We are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, strength, and reason and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And how we properly do this will vary due to our various skills and talents and desires.

The Apostle Paul writes about this issue in *I Corinthians*, chapter 3, where he uses a farming analogy. He says that one person plants, another person waters, but God causes the growth of the plant. In other words, each of us has a part to play, but the result we look for, the growth of the plant, is God's. A popular mantra I hear a lot these days is that we should "respect the process". Have you heard that? Respect the process. The idea is that we have, in most cases, very little control over the results of our creative endeavors. Focusing on whether our efforts are successful can steal the joy from our creative works of love. Whether other people get what you're doing, whether others respect your work, help you with your work, buy your work, and so on, is mostly outside your control. What's in your control is what you yourself do: the process you engage in.

In *I Corinthians* (chapter 3), Paul is urging something similar, but even *better*. There he says that we are God's fellow workers and that we are God's building. Let that sink in, because it's an amazing idea. We are fellow workers in God's project, which is a building consisting of *us*! We do our creative work—aimed at love of God and neighbor—and God brings about the result, which is a kind of building composed of us. I think it's pretty clear that this building is a metaphor for life in the new heavens and new earth, which is our destiny, a life in which deep, abiding peace and harmony reaches to every one and every thing in creation. It is an awesome thought.

Consider today's lectionary reading from *Exodus*.<sup>6</sup> God calls Moses to a giant project: to move his people out of slavery in Egypt to a new place of blessing. That's quite an ask: can you imagine being asked to do something that huge and difficult? Moses reacts just like I expect I would: who am *I* to do something like that? I'm just little old Todd Long from Vicksburg, Mississippi. I mean, I've got a few skills, but breaking up a huge, government-sanctioned slavery ring? That's more than I'm up for. Have you ever seriously wanted to do something, but then you chickened out because you thought it would be too difficult? I have (and I expect you're also

---

<sup>6</sup> *Exodus* 3:1-15.

in good company). But, Moses's story reminds us that good, new things come into the world only when people put themselves out there—give it a go—even if they don't know how the thing will be achieved.

Please notice that, even though Moses succeeded in getting his people out of Egypt, it wasn't easy. He made some big mistakes. His people grumbled. They turned on him and even began worshiping idols. He encountered many frustrations and disappointments along the way. But, he kept going, and today we revere Moses as one of the greats. Even so, Moses didn't get to see the *result* of his project. He didn't get to enter the promised land.

As Paul puts it, Jesus the Anointed is the ultimate foundation of our lives and projects. Some people help in forming that foundation, and some build on the foundation. But, the growth and the results are ultimately God's.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that none of us will achieve successes and results on the way to the ultimate result. You may be one of the fortunate ones whose work gets results, or recognition, or fame. Or perhaps not so fortunate, for success always comes with the temptation to think more highly of yourself than you deserve.<sup>8</sup>

But, here's the thing: We aren't called to be winners. We are called to be co-workers with God. We are called to live by faith, which means we are to give ourselves to creative projects, aimed at love of God and neighbor, trusting God to bring about the results. Thus, we are to keep our sights fixed on the process and the work at hand. When our work is rejected by others, or criticized; when others don't get it, and so on, our task is one of discernment: do we simply try again? Do we learn from our critics and our mistakes, and do it better next time? Do we switch to some other project? These are hard questions that each of us must wrestle with in our own way.<sup>9</sup>

The good news here is this: whether our projects succeed in the eyes of others is not important; what's important is that we are in the game as co-workers with God. God is up to something grand and mysterious; God is building something;

---

<sup>7</sup> See *I Corinthians*, chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> Note that in our New Testament reading for today, Paul warns us against this (see Romans 12:16). I would add, based on *I Corinthians* 3, that none of us does our work from scratch, entirely on our own. We always build on what we've been given and on materials that were already there.

<sup>9</sup> There is no one-size-fits all answer to these questions. And that is why time for prayer, contemplation, and discernment are so important to the Christian life.

and we are integral to that building. What each of us does now in faith is contributing to the kingdom of God, even if we cannot see how from our current vantage point.

So, my message for today is this: as you seek to do your work in the world, focus on the process and the work itself: of course, you will have goals and hopes for achievement, for a process is always directed toward something. But, be comforted in knowing that, whether or not you get the result you aim for or hope for, the result is not on you; be comforted in knowing that, by throwing yourself into projects motivated by love of God and neighbor, you are living a life of faith in God, a life in which you do your work and you trust in God to bring about the results.