

“A Model for Failure”
Matthew 21:1-11 & Matthew 27:11-14

Sermon by Jan Edmiston
Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday – March 20, 2005

Note: We call this “Palm Sunday” because we remember the parade of palms from the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley, and back up again into the City of David. But this day is also called “Passion Sunday” because it marks the beginning of the last week of Jesus’ life.

I’m holding in my hand a card. On this card are the names of four college basketball teams. These teams – in my humble estimation – will be the Final Four in the NCAA tournament next weekend. They are not all #1 seeds. There is indeed a Cinderella in the pack. And this is not to say that I believe that the other 61 teams in the NCAA tournament are losers.

In fact, some of the most lovable, cheering-for-them-even-though-they-have-losing-records teams could not be called “losers.” The Golden Grizzlies? Their coach is an amazing guy. The Bucknell Bison? Who couldn’t cheer-on this team that gave its conference (not just its team but its conference) its first NCAA victory in the history of the Patriot League?

All these teams are winners. But on the evening of April 4, only one team will be victorious.

In the first century, March Madness might have been called Nisan Nuttiness¹ (Nisan being the month of the Jewish calendar when scholars agree that Jesus came into Jerusalem for the last time). What could be *nuttier* than Almighty God allowing his only begotten Son to die the death of a criminal?

But Nisan Nuttiness did not involve any games – at least not the athletic kind. There were power games perhaps. But that first Palm Sunday was deadly serious.

By the end of the week, there would be a slapdash trial. There would be a conviction. There would be a cross. There would be torture, and wailing, and *at least 12 people* who wondered why they had spent the last three years of their lives following this man around.

A mysterious fax came to me this week – maybe it came from one of you. No cover letter was attached.

¹ Nisan – the 7th month in the Jewish calendar – is generally agreed to be the month in which Jesus died, although the precise date is unknown. See: <http://aa.usno.navy.mil/faq/docs/crucifixion.html>

It was an official “Officer Evaluation Report” from the State Department concerning one “Jesus Christ.” Clearly it was someone’s creative idea of a light-hearted yet pointed assessment of Jesus’ ministry. In this case, it was an evaluation of Jesus in his capacity as the “Chief of Redemption and Salvation Services.”

According to this pseudo evaluation, filled out by someone named “John Sanhedrin,” Jesus is an “uneven” performer.

For example:

- While he is “not averse to working long hours,” his zealous style is often “offensive and inconsiderate” to local merchants and money-changers.
- While he has a “calm and unflappable manner,” he has also “demonstrated an insensitivity to local customs and practices” and he has “shown little interest in developing good working relationships with local government officials.”
- While he is a charismatic public speaker, he could use a review of the Book of Leviticus. He has been known to “reinterpret scriptural regulations on his own authority.” For example, he has healed the sick on the Sabbath – clearly against established rules.

This imaginary “Evaluation Report” also includes comments from one Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea who offers these words:

“I did . . . recently have occasion to discuss with Christ his work, and to question him concerning his attitude and philosophy. Although he exuded considerable self-confidence and presence on this occasion, I must candidly state that I found his oral expression . . . somewhat less than satisfactory. That said, I must admit that I found no fault with the man.”

Again, what I just read came from a fax that someone sent for fun last week – someone’s creative attempt to imagine how Jesus Christ might fare in today’s culture of success. What Pilate actually said, according to Matthew’s Gospel, was this:

“Are you the King of the Jews? Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?”

Pilate was amazed that Jesus refused to defend himself. Was he trying to get himself killed? Was he trying to be a failure?

We indeed live in a culture which upholds success as the norm. “Failure is not an option,” they say at Mission Control.²

² ***Failure is Not an Option*** by Gene Kranz, Simon and Schuster, New York: 2000.

Personal failure is often heart-wrenching. Our spirits ache when we witness or when we experience for ourselves failed businesses, failed marriages, failed aspirations . . . when we fail at child-rearing or financial planning or decision-making.

But as we wrestle with our own failures, we must always remember that **we are in good company**. Jesus also failed – not in heavenly terms, of course, but in the eyes of the world.

We who measure success from outward appearances might be fooled by this Palm Sunday story. From all outward appearances it seemed that Jesus was a hero riding into town. People followed his orders.

His was the voice of authority.

There was a “very large crowd” who laid their cloaks on the road. And others laid branches on the road and shouted:

*“Hosanna to the Son of David
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD!”*

But these are just first impressions.

A closer look shows us that this was not such a triumphal entry into Jerusalem at all. Matthew tells us that Jesus rode two animals into town – a colt and a donkey. Riding either of these humble animals was a symbol of lowliness not greatness. To ride both humble animals into town would be ridiculous.

The crowds who gathered were *not* from Jerusalem’s elite. No, these people were the beggars and sinners who had followed Jesus after being healed. We can imagine that they were probably a rather scraggly bunch.

And notice that, according to Matthew, they didn’t call Jesus “a king” or their Messiah. When asked who he was, they simply identified him as “*the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.*” Big deal.

The true elite in Jerusalem – the Pharisees – condemned this parade. As Jesus rode into town, many people didn’t even know who he was.

Jesus’ first stop was the temple where he continued to infuriate the powerful while incorporating the lowly into his fold. He turned over the tables of the money-changers, and then he turned around and cured the lame and blind who had gathered in the temple to beg.³

³ Matthew 21:12-14.

The priests and elders were outraged and called for Jesus' arrest as they secretly planned to kill him.⁴

In the eyes of the world, Jesus was a born loser. He did not change the hearts of everyone he met. He did not bring visible signs of peace on earth. He did not liberate Palestine from Roman rule. He did not even have the loyalty of his closest friends at the end of his life. They left him, denying any affiliation with him.

Jesus died a humiliating, lonely, excruciating death. He was teased for being what he truly was.

We tend to celebrate Palm Sunday as a triumphant feast day, but that is only because we see it from *this* side of the resurrection. In actuality, Palm Sunday is better named "Passion Sunday" – Jesus' final *testimony to failure* in the eyes of the world.

And yet . . . Jesus did not fail. His was a faith so steadfast, so unimpeachable, so strong that the earth could have shuddered. In fact, it did some days later. The ground would shake on Friday.⁵ And the ground would shake again on Sunday.⁶ (But more about that next week.)

There are plenty of people who will remind us that **we** have failed in this life.

I remember attending a wedding reception with an old friend when we were in our early 40s. As we stood there with our champagne glasses, a woman we both know approached us and said, "Jan, how is your husband? Don't you have three children now?" And then she turned to my friend who had never married and said something like, "And why do you think you've never gotten married? Is there something wrong? Do you think it's your personality or your inability to stay committed?" My friend's champagne glass came perilously close to that woman's face. She barely controlled herself.

The world is quick to jump on our shortcomings (or assumed shortcomings) and hold them up for all to remember. Friends and family speak words that pierce us like a sword.

Even in the Church, our failures seem to stick with us in spite of God's grace. We may believe that *God* forgives our trespasses. But we are fairly certain that our sisters and brothers in Christ would not forgive us if only they knew what we've done in secret. We fear that revealing our true selves will render us unlovable or unacceptable.

⁴ Matthew 26:1-4.

⁵ Matthew 27:51.

⁶ Matthew 28:2.

And yet failure is not only a part of life; failure reveals much more about the strength of our faith than success does. Failure in life is an important part of God's plan.

- Failure can be a gift.
- Failure can be an invitation to faith.
- Failure, like *success*, can be used for God's good purposes.

The theologian, Robert McAfee Brown⁷, called our failures "therapeutic errors" – they are one of the ways God helps us grow.

All of us have and will continue to experience failure – either personal or professional or spiritual. That is a given. But what will our failures reveal about our faith?

Will we be so personally humiliated that we give up to point of destroying any hope that God can use us and redeem us?

Will we cling to our past mistakes, making them a lifelong excuse or an unhealable wound – forgetting that God says *we are forgiven* and *the past is over and forgotten*?

Or will we accept Christ as our model for failure?

Jesus rode into the unknown on a donkey and a colt, according to Matthew, realizing full well that life would get much worse before it got better. But he remained faithful, willing to live out God's plan, dependent at every breath upon God's wisdom.

- If you are riding into some unknown territory today, fearful of what might lie ahead of you,
- if you have been weak,
- if you long for someone to reach out and save you . . .

God is available. God is ready to "greatly amaze you." This is God's *purpose* and God's *passion*.

I close with verses written by – believe it or not – a college basketball player. Frankly I'm hoping for his team fails to reach the Final Four. But nevertheless he's not a half bad poet.

*I asked the Lord, "What am I to do?"
He said, "(Child), I made the sky blue.
The rain falls because of me.
Leaves change colors on a fall tree.*

⁷ Brown last taught at Pacific School of Religion until his death in 2001. The setting of this quote is unknown.

*I was the inspiration to Martin Luther King.
I'm the reason Ray Charles could sing.
I've changed others through and through,
And my (child), I'll do the same to you."*⁸

There are countless differences between March Madness and Holy Week. But the biggest difference of all is that, at the end of March Madness, there will be a single winner. But after Holy Week – because of Easter and in spite of all our failures – we *all* have the opportunity to be victorious.

Let us pray:

Gracious and amazing God – you created the good earth and you have bestowed upon us gifts and blessings beyond measure. Deliver us from all that crushes the spirit and terrifies the soul. Save us, we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

⁸ Poem by Duke guard J.J. Redick published in *Sports Illustrated*, February 16, 2005.