

God-Caused Failure

R3-19, May 5, 2019
Jn. 21:1-19, Acts 9:1-20

The Rev. Dr. Chris Hagen
Lake Nokomis L. Ch., Mpls

Life is hard.
We do our best, try to be good, look out for others, curb our impulses
and still bad things come, suffering happens.
Lead a godly life, serve the church, volunteer hours for others,
and still someone criticizes, a hurtful remark.
Saul in the reading from Acts was zealous in his faith.
He defended the Old Testament laws vigorously,
insisting on loyal adherence to the one God.
And then this same God, the God who Saul worshipped and served,
struck him blind.
Sometimes God causes suffering.
It seems offensive, mortifying.
Why would a loving God, Redeemer and all, cause suffering?
Why would God do that!

Sometimes things just do not work out.
Sometimes things do not go according to plan.
You plan carefully,
prepare completely,
execute expertly,
work diligently,
commit fully,
go beyond all expectation and reasonable effort
and still fail miserably.
Failure in our culture has become a mark of moral lack,
an embarrassment at best and condemnation at worse.
The popular, lucrative story lines in movies and myths
are heroes overcoming overwhelming adversity,
giving beyond the call of duty, and achieving victory in the end.
We don't have stories celebrating failure!
Yet failure is a part of life every day.
In every sport contest in the end there are winners—and there are losers.
Many marriages end in divorce, often bitterly.
Business come and go.
Failure is a part of everyday life,
yet failure is not a respected virtue.
We don't have stories celebrating failure—*except in the Bible!*

The Old Testament is one long story of God's heartache
over the failures of God's beloved people.
Time and again people disappoint, disobey, defy God.
Time and again God chases after people,
wooing and loving and calling those who refuse God's passion for them.
God's thwarted love sometimes erupts in anger.
It's not that God is mean or vengeful,
but that God grieves unreturned love.
In the Old Testament God tries again and again to make people see how wrong they are.
In the Old Testament God brings about hardship upon people
as warning for their destructive, sinful ways.

King David, the one king closest to God's heart, most dear to the Almighty,
 suffered loss and shame when he steals another man's wife.¹
 King Ahab in supreme arrogance chose to include in his worship of Yahweh
 the vicious gods of pagan neighbors,
 and so then proceeds to lose his kingdom and his life.²
 King Solomon was the richest king of all Israel,
 with magnificent palaces and the most territory, the envy of nations.
 He became so by following his own careful plans and skillful strategy.
 But "God was *furiosus* with Solomon," so reads First Kings.³
Twice God warned Solomon and Solomon insisted on pursuing his own agenda.
 And so God took away the kingdom from Solomon, dividing it and scattering it,
 causing Solomon to fail in the end.
Sometimes failure is an act of God.

God causes us to fail when our own plans and deeds run counter to the Lord's purposes.
 God causes us to fail when our best intentions run afoul of God's mission of reclaiming the world.
 Nitpicking and squabbling and criticizing
 are the first warnings God sends that we are drifting from God's plan.
 Whether in marriage or business or church,
 unease and mistrust are first signs of us veering from God's mission of reconciling.
 The first signs of something amiss appears as "inter-personal differences."
 That something amiss is the early steps of straying from Godly righteousness.

Congregations across America are declining in numbers and in members.
 Christianity is losing its authority in our culture.
 We can moan about young people not going to church.
 We can lament the bad rap church gets
 because of the bad behavior of certain denominations.
 We can insist we all have to work harder, give more, make sacrifices.
 But perhaps we should pause a moment
and consider that maybe it's God who is doing this,
that maybe God is trying to tell us something.
 Maybe church as we know it has gone a direction apart from God.
 It's unnerving thinking that maybe we good people have presumed too much,
 that perhaps in spite of every good intention, *we are wrong.*

I propose for consideration
 that our goal and focus *should not be* more members, more money and more programs.
 I propose for consideration
 that God has a unique and special purpose for Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church,
 that we have a necessary and valuable service to provide
 Minnehaha, Morris Park and Nokomis neighborhoods,
 that God is leading us into a powerful dynamic partnership
 with Living Table and St. James, along with Hennepin Middle School.⁴

¹ 2 Samuel 11:1-12:23.

² 1 Kings 18-22.

³ 1 Kings 11:9.

⁴ from the Rev. Deb Stehlen, *5 Marks of a Congregation That is Alive*

1. Clear sense of God's unique purpose for us
2. Focus on learning to follow Jesus
3. Direct relevance to the community
4. Ability to mobilize resources for mission
5. Pay attention to where the energy is
6. Ability to connect with increasingly diverse and secular culture
7. Willingness to change

I propose that you, Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church,
 have a particular gift of welcome and a deep passion for service
 that can overcome ethnic, racial and cultural differences
 better than most other congregations around.

The decision before us is whether we are willing to change as necessary,
 are we willing to set aside long-held assumptions of what is church,
 are we willing to make room for others who God is sending our way?

We no longer can afford to manage this building and the important ministries we do.
 We are at financial risk.
 Your staff and volunteers are stressed.
 There are a dozen different causes you support,
 yet no coherent connection between them or integration.
 You members are not of like mind on what Lake Nokomis Lutheran is about.

Perhaps God is asking of us something different.
 Perhaps God is telling us in this time,
 that we have a different purpose, uncertain and unclear now,
 but a purpose driven and impassioned by God's Spirit for the sake of our neighbors.

Peter went fishing.
 His pals joined him.
 It was an act of defeat.
 Jesus had called them all,
 appointed them and trained them and given them authority
 to carry on all that Jesus had done,
 to do the miracles and deeds that Jesus had done.

Peter and his pals were to do what Jesus did.
 But Peter goes fishing instead.
 It is failure.
 Peter fails when he drifts from the purpose to which Jesus called him.
 Jesus sent him and the other disciples to bring peace, forgive sins, restore health, raise the dead,
 and instead he falls back on old ways and safe programs.

And it does not work.
 He catches no fish.
 The familiar past shall not be his future.
 Peter's plans are at odds with God's and Peter fails.

Notice, however, that Jesus does not leave Peter to figure this out for himself.
 When Peter and pals fail,
 Jesus still comes and calls them again.
 Following the commands of Jesus they succeed at fishing,
 but following Jesus they cannot remain at fishing.
 God has bigger plans.
 Jesus makes them succeed, feeds them for the task ahead,
 and commissions them once again to carry on the work of Jesus.

Then Jesus turns to Peter in one of the most poignant moments of the Bible.
 Peter is the one who denied Jesus publicly three times,
 turning against Jesus at the most critical time,
 not once in a moment of weakness, but three times willfully, intentionally.

Now Jesus comes to undo Peter's failure.
 "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"
 Do you love me more than this familiar life,
 more than fishing and continuing on as you always did,
 more than going about making your own plans and doing your own thing?

“Yes, Lord. You *know* that I love you.”

Three times he asks, and three times Jesus calls, three times to make sure Peter gets it.
No longer fishing, now an uncertain plan but very certain call to follow.

Sometimes God causes failure because we are on the wrong path,
because we are hesitant to do God’s work,
or because we have misguided notion of who God is and what church is supposed to be.

Failure is sometimes God-induced.

Going back to fishing when we should be bravely following Christ
we will fail dramatically.

God will not join us in going down wrong paths.

God will not bless our best intentions should they diverge from God’s plan.

God will accomplish God’s mission of saving and restoring the world.

God is on a mission to restore and reconcile all that has gone wrong in the world.

We are commissioned *to be the means*

by which lives are changed and people restored.

This summer the Transition Team

will be assembling information and writing the *Ministry Site Profile*.

The *Ministry Site Profile* is the description of this congregation
that is used in calling the next pastor.

The main part of the profile describes God’s purpose for us,
to what is God calling Lake Nokomis,
how do we know it, and what are we doing about it.

At this time it is not clear.

The ten members of the Transition Team this summer

will be sorting through demographic data,
but also will be asking you for insight.

This is *not* about what *you* want for this church and your pastor.

This is about what *God* wants and what *God* is asking of us.

No more fishing as usual, Jesus is taking Lake Nokomis in a different direction.

But we need your prayers.

We need you to be thinking, praying, talking about what God might be asking.

We need you to intentionally wonder and dream about how might things be different.

We need you to sort through what you like about Lake Nokomis

but may not be part of God’s plans.

This church, you people

have particular abilities, a wealth of skills, specific perspective and values,
that is needed now for the people of south Minneapolis.

Most intriguing is what God might be saying to us about

a shared campus of three congregations,
a school

and possibly other partners such as a health clinic or after school child care.

God is asking of you at this time to wonder what this might be like.

Then this summer we will talk more.

Amen.